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THE PILGRIMS' MARCH

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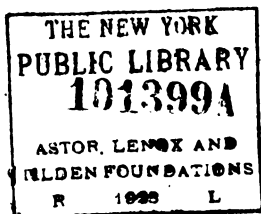
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NEW YORK
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1909

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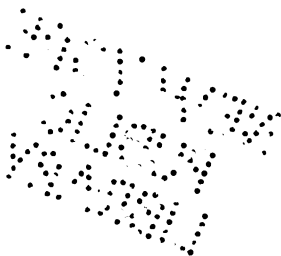


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Published, February, 1909



THE QUINN & BODEN CO. PRESS
RAHWAY, N. J.

TO
MY MOTHER

TO

T. F. G. M.

MY DEAR FRED,

This little yarn owes so much to you, both in the actual putting together and in other less obvious ways, that it ought not to take its first plunge into the uncertain waters of publicity without acknowledging the debt. Stripped of all its might-have-beens and want-to-bes, and shivering on the bank in its suit of cold print, it looks (and no doubt feels) a little naked and diminished. But that is no fault of yours; and if it has not dedicated itself to you or anybody living, it is only because it possessed a yet bigger creditor—as nobody will more readily realize than yourself.

Ever yours,

H. H. B.

August, 1908.

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THE PILGRIMS' MARCH

CHAPTER I

IN WHICH A BUGLE IS SOUNDED

IN recording the history of a little journey, or even the fragment of a greater one, it might be difficult, perhaps, to find a more appropriate beginning than a breakfast-table in spring. And Broggers would go further, and assure you that no story could have a more fortunate birthplace than this particular valley of the Upper Thames; nay, than this identical breakfast-table, with Mrs. Charlock's cooking up to its usual standard.

It would be only Broggers himself, the incarnation of an unromantic middle age, and, it must be confessed, of a certain prosperous rotundity, who would strike the incongruous note; and perhaps tend, at the outset, to bestow upon a serious narrative an unintended birth-right of bathos.

Moreover, as he would be the first to point out, it was not his pilgrimage that was of any interest at all; and if he ever became, even for the briefest occasion, a *deus ex machinâ* in the wanderings of anybody else, it was by no design of his own, but in fact in his own despite. Added to which, there would be the fact that, although he undoubtedly possessed a weakness

The Pilgrims' March

for good breakfasting, he was at the same time perfectly conscious of cutting a somewhat grotesque figure in the arms of spring.

And yet while, to the end, he would protest against becoming the introductory figure in any story whatsoever, his deeper convictions would be almost certain to bubble up to the surface, sooner or later; and he would assure you that to the true pilgrim such details as age and avoirdupois are of very little account—that to such an one the season must always be spring, and, in a sense, breakfast-time, since in the progress of the Spirit (which is the only one worth emphasizing) the months of fruition are generally somewhere a little way in front; while, if one must needs dine in Olympus, it is best to start the journey with a well-filled stomach. From all of which it will be gathered almost immediately that Broggers, while conscious of his own possibilities, had yet managed to temper his enthusiasm with a certain philosophy.

That these possibilities had delayed somewhat in showing any adequate promise of fulfilment, he himself would be the first to deplore; and searching about for reasons would, in his honester moments, admit a temperamental affection for leisure, to which an easy environment and a sufficient income would seem to have entitled him. Besides, as he would tell you, life was so very good in itself, and his friends were so numerous, that the merely passive and grateful acceptance of benefits bestowed seemed to occupy the greater portion of his time. There was so much to absorb that the moment for production never succeeded in coming definitely to hand.

“And yet there can be no doubt,” he observed, “there cannot be the least doubt that to rise at eleven

on so divine a morning as this is little short of a crime."

He dabbed his chin thoughtfully with his shaving-brush, and stared out beyond his looking-glass into a green world of tree-tops rocking to and fro in the morning sunlight. Between them, here and there, he could see blue fragments of the distant downs, and the delicate, windy line that divided them from the sky. He sighed a little, and returned to his soaping.

"Now there *was* a time," he proceeded, "there *was* a time when I rose punctually, if not with the lark, at any rate no later than nine in the morning at least; wasn't there, Barker?"

"I don't remember it, sir," said Barker. Broggers waved his shaving-brush.

"Ah, but then memory was never your strong point, Barker," he reminded him, "and, besides, Instinct is stronger than memory, Barker. It's primal. It's inherent in the very tissue of us. It's a constituent of our ultimate protoplasm. It's dependent upon none of your modern, upstart, commissural nerve-fibers, linking up the latest-acquired convolutions of a nineteenth-century brain. It's as old as the hills, Barker—older than most of 'em; and Instinct, Barker, Instinct tells me that there was once a time when I rose each morning at nine o'clock, winter and summer, hail, snow, frost, fire, or flood. Damn it! now I've cut myself!"

Barker coughed.

"Flannels, sir, or tweeds?" he asked, poisoning a clothes brush.

Broggers stuck his head out of the window, one side of his face ruddy and shining, the other still masked in a lather of soapsuds. The wind swept about his head (growing, alas! more than a little bald), and

the lawn below him, richer than old wine, and as soft as a child's cheek, stretched placidly to its boxwood boundary. Some cows, in the pasture beyond, were browsing at their leisure, or rubbing idle flanks against the trees of his little domain; while above these, flickering between the willow-trunks, there came up to him, in sapphire and gold, bright glimpses of the river. It was the second week in May; and the bells of Wrayley were ringing out the hour from the old tower upon the hill.

To Broggers, this green cup, in which his little park was set, represented the last word in natural perfection. He returned to it always with a growing admiration, and left it (each year the occasions grew more seldom) with an increasing reluctance. It was just the sort of beauty to live with, he would explain, not so grand as to be too emotionally exacting, but the warm heart of an intimate paradise, from which all sinister forces had been long ago eliminated.

To-day the wind was blowing strong, but with the gentlest of tempers; and the whole air was touched with an unreasonable, vivifying gaiety. Broggers opened his lungs and drew down big draughts of it, while, in the bedroom behind him, Barker began to whistle a little. Presently he pulled in his head again, shaking it in self-reproach. The soap had dried from his other cheek, and he apostrophized his image in the glass.

"Monstrous!" he said, "monstrous!" and reapplied the shaving-brush.

Finishing his hymn tune, Barker coughed once more.

"Flannels, sir, or tweeds?" he repeated patiently. But, beneath his sky-blue pyjamas, Broggers had

merely found a grateful freshness in the air that played about his limbs.

"Flannels," he decided. "Let us welcome summer at the threshold in suitable attire." But Barker, cocking an eyebrow at the gusty tree-tops, remained suspicious of the weather.

"Rather treacherous, sir," he ventured.

"Then a thicker vest, Barker," observed his master; "and, by the way, I wish you wouldn't whistle hymn tunes when I'm shaving. I half believe that that's the reason why I chipped my chin. It's inappropriate, Barker. Never be inappropriate."

There was a twinkle of steel across stubble; and it was then, for the first time, that there rose suddenly upon the air a heartening suggestion of fried bacon, ineffably delicate, the merest fringe upon the manifold scents of spring. It came for a crown upon this matchless, sunlit moment; "For it is the true test," as Broggers was wont to observe to his friends, even at the risk of boring them with over-repetition, "it is the true test of your sincere lover of life, of your man that lives, that he finds in his breakfast the sweetest hour of the twenty-four—a real festival of delight; none of your sour and scrambled tributes to the tyranny of a brass gong; none of your anæmic ghosts of a last night's over-repletion; none of your pale seedlings of a railway indigestion; but a genuine, leisurely, and health-giving feast, the hall-mark upon a contented day, a large, nourishing, and deliberate meal, an inviolable sacrament, a sanctified memory."

Here he would pause for a moment, and take stock of his particular audience, so that the concluding sentence had two versions. Thus, if there were married men present, and it must be obvious by now that Brog-

gers was himself a bachelor, he would here interpolate a sigh.

"It's our silver lining, you know," he would explain on behalf of his single brothers.

But when the Benedicks were absent, and there rose up to him pallid and punctual visions of family breakfast-tables, he would shake his head in self-congratulation.

"It's the price they pay for matrimony," he would observe; "and it's lamentably heavy."

Mrs. Charlock crisped bacon to perfection, and Broggers held that there were few more fruitful causes of an infectious good temper. He even mastered the final efforts of a rebuking conscience so well that Barker found himself basking in a reflected victory. For next moment his master, surveying him out of the corners of his eyes, made him a concession.

"You may now whistle," he remarked, "so long as you keep off that particularly detestable but haunting jingle that you tell me came out last year, or the year before, was it?"

Neither spring nor breakfast made any especial appeal to Barker; but now a faint light of enthusiasm flickered across his brow.

"Which one do you mean, sir?" he asked. Broggers looked up from his strop, and a playful breeze sent his shaving-paper dancing across the room, where Barker caught it without emotion.

"Tum-tum-te-tum-tum-tum; ta-ta-te-ta-ta," he hummed.

Barker nodded, a little self-consciously perhaps, but with the air of an expert.

"Yes, sir; two years ago next month, sir, that 'ymn was first sung in these parts, at our chapel in Wrayley,

sir. 'Rescue the perishin',' sir, 'care *for* the dyin'.' "

"Then don't whistle it any more," said Broggers.

"Very good, sir."

Barker held up a shirt, into which his master proceeded to insert himself.

"Why can't you stick to the old hymns?" he continued, emerging with ruffled hair; "you've always voted Conservative, haven't you?"

"'Eaven 'elpin' me, sir," said Barker, pulling down the shirt-tails; "always, sir."

"Then what do you want to go gadding about with new hymns for, eh?"

Barker cleared his throat a little.

"Well, sir," he explained, "seein' as you've forced me, sir, in a manner of speakin', sir—politics is politics, an' religion's religion, an' what suits one don't necessarily suit the hother, sir; likewise a Conservative I am, by politics, sir, but a Primitive Methodist by conviction. Likewise a act of Parlyment's a act of Parlyment; and *as* such I always votes Conservative. But when it comes to 'ymns, sir, if a 'ymn's a good 'ymn, sir, *as* such I accepts it, 'owever recent, an' in a manner of speakin', of whatever sex, sir. I accepts it, an' acts upon it, 'Eaven 'elpin' me, *an'* whistles it, sir; which the Reverend Mister Lomax, sir, 'Igh Anglican as 'e is, and *as* such to be regarded with suspicion, sir—as I 'opes you'll forgive me, sir, seein' as 'e's a friend of yours, sir—says to me last week, me bein' whistlin' 'Old the Fort,' 'Music's a great gift, Barker,' 'e says, 'rightly used'—savin' your presence, sir."

"Ah, but that's just what you don't save, Barker," observed Broggers. "Now—why, God bless my soul, mind that water-jug, Barker."

But Barker had fielded a damp and twisted towel, that now came hurtling through the window, with his customary phlegmatic accuracy; and next moment the head and shoulders of Broggers' ward and nephew appeared over the window-sill.

Broggers believed him to be about sixteen years old; and had supposed him, at this moment, to have been academically engaged at Drayton College, across the hills.

"It's that infernal Founder's holiday," he remembered suddenly; "I had forgotten all about it. What do you mean by it, sir? What do you mean by it, I say? What do you mean by shinning up rain-pipes before breakfast, and disturbing middle-aged bachelors at their morning toilet? What the aurora-borealis——?"

But Chris held up a warning finger.

"You mustn't swear, Uncle," he reminded him, "or you'll shock Barker, you know. Won't he, Barker?"

But Barker looked up deprecatingly from the chest of drawers.

"In a manner of speakin', Mister Christopher, sir," he said, "I 'ope as I'm never shocked at the gentry, sir."

"Good man," said Chris, entering slowly into safety. Then he poked his head out of the window.

"I say, you should just see his pyjamas," he observed cordially to a hitherto unsuspected audience; "they're simply whipping." (Chris had never really mastered his r's.) "Talk about the Mediterwanean Sea——"

He dropped them gently upon some subjacent heads.

Broggers seized him by the shoulders. "Good God, boy!" he shouted, "what on earth are you doing with

my wardrobe? O Lord, what an example I'm setting you. And how many more of you are there?"

But Chris had perched himself penitently upon the bed-rail; and now began to regard his uncle with obvious remorse.

"I'm so sowwy," he said, "but they're weally clinking. I haven't seen anything like them before, and it's only Margwet and Wobin. They'll take gweat care of them. They will twuly."

Broggers fumed about his bedroom.

"What did you make against Radley, sir?" he thundered presently.

"Nine, and thirty-six," said Chris, "and I got two wickets. But it wasn't my wicket, you know—too dwy."

"It was jolly good really," shouted a younger voice along the same line of approach; and presently Robin Rivers appeared, curling himself up upon the window-sill, a round-faced nonentity, on a somewhat smaller scale, but incidentally the Hero of this narrative.

"He won the match for us, Broggers, just on time; it was jolly exciting."

"Wobin's made a man," said Chris irrelevantly, blushing a little.

"Made a what?" puzzled Broggers.

"A man," repeated Chris, "a weal wipper; modeling, you know. I made him bwing it. Old Philpot says it's the *weal* thing; weal art, you know. It's downstairs. Margwet's taking care of it."

Broggers struggled into his jacket.

"Well, you're a wonderful pair of boys," he admitted; "but, upon my word—do you intrude upon your headmaster's privacy like this, I should like to know?"

"Not for the same purpose," said Chris; "and it's genewally a case of his intwuding upon ours."

Robin grinned.

"He intruded upon mine, yesterday," he said, "six times."

"And I should think you jolly well deserved it," said Broggers. "What have you been doing on the way down; bathing, eh, in spite of the Thames conservancy?"

"We biked down, you know," explained Robin, "and Margaret met us at Screw Bridge, and the water's as warm as anything, and you should just see Margaret diving, belly-floppers every time, and I say, we're pretty hungry."

"So we're going to have some more bweakfast with you," explained Chris.

"We've told Mrs. Charlock," said Robin.

"And she said 'Wight ho!' or words to that effect," said Chris.

"We told her lots of bacon," said Robin.

"And some more squish," said Chris.

"You mean to do yourselves pretty well," observed Broggers.

Chris cleared his throat oratorically.

"Bweakfast," he quoted, "is the twue test of weal gweatness, the hall-mark upon ewevy honest waistcoat, an inviolable sacwament, and a sanctified memowry. Encore! Hooway!"

His uncle pulled him off the bed-rail.

"You're an extraordinarily disrespectful and entirely negligible young scoundrel," he observed; "and what have you done with Margaret, you ungallant young rascals?"

Robin nodded his head towards the window.

"Oh, she's all right," he said; "you needn't bother about her. She's too jolly fat to climb up here, and besides she's jawing to Mrs. Charlock. She's trying to persuade her to make a jam omelette."

"But we'll haul her up, if you want her," offered Chris obligingly.

Broggers shook his head.

"There are quite enough of you here already," he said, "and we'll join Miss Lomax in the breakfast-room."

It will be remembered, by everybody who has taken even the smallest interest in the study of botany, that the Honorable Robert Brogham's monograph upon the cryptogams of Berkshire is at any rate monumental. It represents, indeed, the arduous researches of a lifetime, and was for the most part written in the study of Whinchurch Hall. This was a room in the south-eastern corner of the building, with windows upon both aspects; so that, from the one, the long drive and a considerable stretch of white road, and from the other, the river with the red-roofed village of Wrayley beyond it, were easily visible. In her lifetime, Mrs. Brogham, Broggers' mother, had always lamented the dedication of so delightful a room to so dreary a fad (as she was pleased to term it) as the study of botanical specimens.

"Why can't he write about his silly old crypto-things somewhere else?" she complained. But her husband had remained obdurate; and after her death had seldom spent a day outside its walls.

Broggers himself had so far shared his mother's opinions as to deplore with her the misuse of so desirable an apartment; and when, in the course of years, he had succeeded to the estate, one of his first steps had

been to consign the botanical literature, mounts, microscopes, and other débris, to an obscure corner in one of the attics.

"Such a chamber," he had explained to Mrs. Charlock, "with all due respect to my father, can have been designed for only one end. Let us restore it to its rightful function. It shall be my breakfast-room."

"And the study, sir?" queried his housekeeper.

Broggers regarded her thoughtfully. Then he waved his hand a little.

"That must be a matter for consideration," he observed. And as a matter for consideration it had remained ever since. Indeed, it seems probable that Broggers considered the possession of a study to be somewhat superfluous in the case of a bachelor with simple tastes; while, for breakfasting, this corner room of the old house was so obviously ordained that there were times when he would sit lost in wonderment at his ancestors' amazing dulness.

"For four hundred years," he would observe, "for four—hundred—years, as far as I can gather, these misguided people have eaten their breakfasts in the sour and sunless north, with this possible paradise within fifteen yards of them. Is it to be wondered at that I, their scion, have never been able to achieve more than some half-dozen verses of very minor poetry?"

And to-day, with the southern windows open, and the whole room flooded with a delicate, limpid sunshine, the marvel broke in upon him once more. For where in all the world could there be, at this moment, a spot so completely satisfying as this? The goldenest of daffodils nodded from their vases. The daintiest of tonic aromas rose up from the spout of the coffee-

pot; while in the window sat a little girl with round cheeks and a brownish mop of hair, dangling two plump and black-stockinged legs. She was the only child of the rector of Blend, a mile or so up the valley; and Broggers made her his courtliest bow.

"How d'you do, Miss Lomax?" he said.

"How d'you do, Broggers?" said Margaret. "Mrs. Charlock's doing me a jam omelette. Isn't it decent of her?"

"Wonderfully decent," agreed Broggers, looking over his letters.

Would he fish? Would he boat? Would he be a dear old man, and escort a party to the Academy? Would he be present at the bishop's tea-fight? He affected an air of concern at all these importunities, though he knew quite well that presently he would accept them all, and with an equal grace decline each, as its day fell due. He looked up, with the white road shining before his eyes. Far away, there was a wagon, grumbling slowly towards the village; and beyond it a little telegraph-boy on a bicycle. The drive was carpeted with all manner of glowing lights and dancing silken shadows. Who could expect him to break away from such a home as this?

And all the while, upon the end of the breakfast-table, stood Robin's Man of Clay, placed there by Margaret with infinite care, and surreptitiously regarded by both Chris and herself, as Broggers fell to upon his toast and bacon. Only Robin, with an affected nonchalance, ate stolidly, with his eyes upon his plate. Margaret sped pleading glances towards Chris from her seat in the window, but he shook his head firmly. For this was to take his uncle by surprise; and they were to read upon his countenance his genu-

ine opinion, as apart from any that might be determined by the kindness of his heart. And presently, watching furtively, they saw his leisurely glance turn slowly upon the little figure, while upon the instant all three of the children became models of a motionless indifference.

Broggers leaned forward across the table, and moved a vase of daffodils a little to one side. Then he adjusted his eyeglasses, and took a long stare. Chris' triumph became too strong for him, and he began to smile openly, while Margaret was jerking up and down upon the window-ledge. And again it was only Robin, but with reddening cheeks, who remained unmoved and continued his breakfast.

And it was good. There was no doubt about it. It was astonishingly good—the figure of a man, brandishing one arm, straddle-legged, and the very embodiment of a boyish braggadocio. It was crowded with imperfections. There were points where every principle of anatomy was set frankly at defiance. But there was no mistaking the spirit of the whole. Broggers pushed it back a little; so that now it stood up, outlined against the window and the white road beyond. The wagon had dwindled into distance. The little telegraph-boy was fumbling at the gate. Broggers folded his glasses again, and smiled across at Robin.

"That's very good," he said. "How long did it take you?"

"Two afternoons," mumbled Robin.

Broggers got up, and walking round the table, picked it up and examined it thoughtfully.

"Old Philpot said it was the weal thing," repeated Chris. "Old Philpot's our drawing-master."

Broggers seemed to be weighing it in his hand.

"Yes," he said at last, "I'm inclined to agree with him. I'm inclined to think that it is—what you might call the real thing. It's very good, Robin, very good indeed."

Chris thumped the table with his cricketer's fist.

"Hooway!" he shouted; "I jolly well said so all along."

"I should like to kiss you," said Margaret to Broggers, and the boys began to laugh at her.

Barker handed the telegram to his master.

"And is the boy to wait for an answer, sir?"

Broggers read the message carelessly with his thoughts on the clay figure. Then he read it again more slowly, although it was not long, and its meaning quite unmistakable. It consisted in fact of only four words, and he sat down again a little heavily.

"No," he said, "there's no answer."

With the suspense of his criticism over, all the children were talking at once, while the red envelope that had contained the telegram fluttered across the table, and caught up against the legs of Robin's man.

"Well fielded, sir," said Chris.

Broggers finished his coffee.

"Have you been home yet?" he asked Robin. But the boy shook his head.

"Not yet," he explained; "Chris persuaded me to come here first."

"How long does it take you to ride there from here?" asked Broggers.

"About twenty minutes," said Robin.

"Well then, I think perhaps you had better cut along," said Broggers. "You—your father's a bit seedy."

"Is he bad?" asked Robin.

"Pretty bad," said Broggers, "or they wouldn't have wired, you know."

Both the boys rose from the table. "I'll see you off," said Chris.

Broggers walked over to the open window. The day would seem almost to have grown in brilliance; and it was a little hard to believe that now there would never be a spring, in all the springs to come, without some lingering thread of this tiny message woven deep into its texture. It was a little hard to believe; and yet he was very certain that this must be the case.

"If only I weren't so damnably sentimental!" he interjected. Because of course this, or something of this nature, had been bound to happen some day. But why now? why now?

For now it was as though a sword had fallen suddenly upon the peace of this little valley; for Robin and his mother, a sword; for Lomax and himself, a sword, since Rivers and Lomax and he had been knit together in a bond so rare and intimate that even Broggers himself had scarcely realized till this moment how closely it had bound them.

He reviewed the years, the firm friendship of the old Harrow days, the gay, sporadic meetings in town and continent, these latter times in the quiet Berkshire upland; the common interests of temperament and memory, the common love of these three children, Rivers' boy, Lomax' motherless daughter, and his own ward and nephew. He turned back to the table, and his glance fell upon the little red envelope, still held there by the swaggering puny legs of the clay man. Yes, the sword was upon them all.

And yet, was it a sword only? In later years he

came gradually to invest these tidings with a subtler significance; and already even some dim sense of another possible meaning to this message was beginning to creep into the background of his sorrow—a strange, and stronger note, insistent and awakening, as though, far off, some waiting sentinel had set his lips to a bugle. Margaret came across the room to him, looking up into his face with comprehending eyes.

“Those boys are very stupid,” she said. “I know what it is quite well. Colonel Rivers is dead.”

CHAPTER II

FROM WHICH THE HERO EMERGES

"YES, my dear," said Broggers, "you're quite right. Colonel Rivers is dead, but——" He stared at her for a minute or two, forgetting her as she stood there, for all the solemnity in her brown eyes, until a sudden access of self-reproach brought her back to him once more; since if this event had been so obvious to a very small girl of twelve, why then—— He fixed his spectacles again, and looked down at her.

"But how did you know?" he concluded.

"Oh, I only guessed," she told him. (It was her gift, even then, to be better perhaps at discovering other people's secrets than at concealing her own.) "I only sort of guessed."

Broggers pursued his line of inquiry with some anxiety.

"He—er—he hadn't been looking unwell or anything lately, had he? You hadn't noticed anything that made you suspicious?"

But even clever little girls of twelve (and nobody ever thought of calling Margaret clever), even clever little girls of twelve are fortunately not observant of the physical signs of disease; and, anyway, she knew quite well that this was a question to which it would be cruel to answer yes. So she shook her head, and slipped out across the window-sill on to the velvety grass.

Broggers watched her as she disappeared from the

lawn and dwindled presently beyond the riverside willows. Had he really been unobservant, or neglectful? He rang the bell, and showed the telegram to Barker.

"I haven't been over there since I came back, and I was away for a week," he said. "Had you heard anything about Colonel Rivers' health?"

But Barker shook his head; and his master strove to reassure himself.

"Poor old Rivers!" he said; "no, I'm sure that it must have been sudden—eh, Barker? I've got wonderfully sharp eyes for that sort of thing, eh, haven't I, Barker?"

"Wonderful sharp, sir," agreed Barker. "There was old Mrs. Wheeler, sir, if you remember, as you said to me only a week afore she was took, sir, 'Barker,' you says anxious, 'that old lady's lookin' remarkable chippy, Barker, about the gills, Barker'; an' them your very words, sir, an' 'er dead o' Toosday follerin', sir."

Broggers nodded his head.

"I remember," he said. "But then I haven't seen poor Rivers since I came back from Devonshire—when was it?—ten days ago; and I was away a fortnight, eh? A lot can happen in a month, Barker, the very devil of a lot. By—by George, Barker, I hope he didn't want for any—anything vital, Barker. But Lomax would have seen to that."

For Colonel Rivers, in a life of no sort of distinction, had merely become a little more firmly embedded in the opinions of his family (a poor but upright race), and a little less well-endowed than even his shallow-pursed ancestors; facts that had never greatly troubled him until these last few months.

During this time, however, when, for all the suddenness of the tidings to his friends, he himself had been living quite consciously in the presence of the end, it had begun to dawn upon him that gentle blood and a generous disposition, so admirable an inheritance in themselves, might prove, with a total lack of means for their chief companion, a somewhat uncomfortable triumvirate for his descendants. And it was this, rather than anything else, rather even than their approaching separation, that had sometimes set a trouble in his eyes as he looked at his wife. For poverty in the services is a good schoolmaster in the art of saying good-bye; and these two had encountered plenty of opportunities to learn the lesson well.

"Poor little woman!" he would say. "What a lot of problems I'm leaving you! Are you strong enough for them?"

And then perhaps she would put a hand upon his lips.

"Hush!" she would tell him. "You know quite well that you've promised me never to talk like that; never even to think like it."

"There's Robin," he would remind her, from time to time, "I know he'll try to take care of you. I know he'll do his best, Esther."

"Of course he will."

"I should have liked him to go into the army. He'll be the first of us who—who hasn't been able to. It's a bit hard, isn't it? And he's—just a trifle slack, isn't he, Esther?"

"Ah, but he's such a boy still. We shall get along famously. We're such good chums, too."

She would bend over him, running her fingers through his hair, as she had done in the first girlish days of their engagement.

"Dear old boy, you mustn't worry about us, you know."

"Ah, you're never afraid," he would tell her. Sometimes they would stray back to the old subaltern times, ridiculous, ardent hours, that had almost justified the long separations and the dingy Southsea lodgings—that almost justified to-day.

"Though we've really seen so little of one another," he told her once; "not half enough."

It was the only note of petulance, and she shook her head severely.

"Now you're being sentimental," she scolded, half laughing at him, as they had resolved to laugh at one another so many times before; and then stooping, she spilt an unexpected tear or two upon his forehead.

"But, oh, how I love you when you're sentimental."

To the end, a certain quixotic pride would appear illogically, as once when he was talking about Robin's future.

"Poor old Robin!" he said. "He'll have some toughish fighting. But you mustn't let him accept—you mustn't let old Broggers or any one give him money. I made him promise me that once. He couldn't think what the deuce I was driving at. You must keep him to his word, Esther. I couldn't have a boy of mine dependent on charity—not even old Broggers'."

"It won't hurt Robin to battle," said Esther.

Thus prosaically, in the front bedroom of his little house in Blend, Colonel Rivers passed over to join his fathers, taking, indeed, his pension with him; but leaving behind, for such as cared to think about it, a cheerful and simple memory.

His will was by no means complicated, and left to

Esther the freehold of his cottage, the interest upon some insurance money, and an income of one hundred and fifty pounds a year, the whole to be in trust for Robin at her death.

"Good Lord!" said Broggers to Lomax, "she'll starve. People can't live on a hundred and seventy pounds a year, can they?"

"It has been done, I think," Lomax assured him.

"It's preposterous," stormed Broggers. "It's a crime, Lomax. We mustn't allow it."

"You must remember," said Lomax, "that she will have no rent to pay."

"What's the rent of a twopenny-halfpenny little show like that?"

"It makes a difference to a hundred and seventy pounds a year."

"Do you honestly think that she can manage?" asked Broggers.

"I'm sure that she'll try, and I'm pretty certain that she'll succeed," said Lomax.

"And what about the boy's education?" pursued Broggers, with a gloomy triumph. "I knew you'd forgotten something. That's the worst of you parsons. You're such hopeless business men."

Lomax smiled.

"And you middle-aged landed proprietors are such good ones, eh?" he asked. "I should like to know how Whinchurch would get along without your agent."

"He's a very useful fellow," granted Broggers.

"I'm afraid the boy will have to go to a cheaper school," went on Lomax.

"I won't hear of it," said Broggers. "I—I insist upon his staying at Drayton. I insist upon having his influence over Chris."

From Which the Hero Emerges 23

"But Chris is at least three years older than Robin, and probably twice as steady," Lomax reminded him.

"I don't care," said Broggers; "and what's more, I don't believe it. Chris is an impertinent young ruffian. It's no good shaking your head, Arthur. I won't allow it."

"I think you'll find Esther pretty obdurate," said Lomax.

"You've been trying her, eh?"

"I suggested that perhaps some—er—arrangement might be made."

"And she wouldn't have it?"

"Not a bit of it."

But Broggers had remained unconvinced, and had faced Esther himself upon the subject.

"You mean," she said, "that you'll pay for him at Drayton?"

Broggers' cheeks grew rather pink.

"Dash it all, Esther," he said, "you needn't put it like that. I'm thinking of Chris. I'm asking you to do me a favor."

Esther smiled at him.

"You aren't very subtle, you know, Broggers," she told him; "and, besides, I think you once made a promise to Jack, didn't you?"

Broggers stared at her with an open mouth.

"Lord! so I did," he said at last. "So *that* was what he meant, was it?" Then he looked suddenly into her eyes. "I say, Esther," he exclaimed, "did he know that he was going so soon?"

She nodded.

"Did *you* know?"

"Of course."

"And neither of you told us—told anybody?"

"What would have been the good?"

She smiled.

"Good God!" groaned Broggers, "I didn't know that there *were* such people in the world, and now I suppose I can't do anything at all?"

"But you're doing a very great deal."

He stared at her blankly.

"You're teaching Robin and me what it is to have friends—and that's rather a lot, you know."

And now, when this narration must of necessity skip five years before settling down to its real business, here was the same problem cropping up once more, with Esther no whit less obstinate—absurdly obstinate, since to Broggers the idea of anybody entering into business as a very junior clerk, with the faint prospect, in some remote future, of acquiring some interest in the commercial handling of tea, was so entirely distasteful that surely Esther herself must agree with him in her inmost heart. He admitted the kindness of this London relative, but assured both Esther and Lomax that it was misplaced. She must remember, too, that his own nephew, Chris, had already caused him one disappointment, embarking, after three lazy years at Cambridge, upon a medical career at one of the London hospitals—a profession for which he, Broggers, had but small respect and no personal use, in spite of a failing constitution.

"A failing what?" wondered Esther, with perplexed eyes.

Broggers nodded his head somberly.

"Constitution," he repeated. "I don't know whether it's a thwarted will or this confounded Jan-

uary weather. But I'm no longer the man I used to be, Esther."

"But I never heard that you had been unwell," she said.

He stroked his forehead.

"Headaches," he said. "I've had two quite lately, one in August and the other in November."

She expressed her sympathy.

"You must take care of yourself," she told him.

"I do," said Broggers. "In fact, it's my *raison d'être*, so to speak. But I say, what about this cousin of Jack's? I've never met him, have I?"

"I dare say not," said Esther. "He married Jack's first cousin, you know; and she died a great many years ago. Jack saw very little of her family and husband."

"There's a family, is there?"

"Three sons and a daughter, and a sister to keep house."

"Are they nice?"

The least pucker appeared upon Esther's forehead.

"I really know so little about them personally," she said. "Mr. Wing is a very prosperous man, I believe, the senior partner in Wing & Anderson. He's a Nonconformist and he lives in Highbury."

"Where's that?" asked Broggers.

"Dalston, Mildmay Park, Canonbury, Highbury," recited Esther. "We've just been looking it up. You go there from Broad Street."

"I know Broad Street," said Broggers. "Nasty, noisy place. And what's he going to do for the boy?"

"He offers to give him a home and forty pounds a year," explained Esther.

"That isn't very much, is it?" asked Broggers.

"We think it's quite good," she said. "You see Robin is only nineteen, and he's not—he isn't a brilliant sort of boy."

Broggers smiled at her struggling honesty.

"His school reports"—she hesitated—"his school reports weren't——"

"Full of gold medals and prizes," suggested Broggers. "Thank God!"

"And besides," she added, "beggars mustn't be choosers, must they?"

"If it comes to that," he said, "your true beggar is generally a beggar by choice. Is Robin happy about his prospects?"

"I think so," she said.

"Think so?" wondered Broggers.

She looked at him again with her half-deprecatory eyes.

"We're very good chums," she explained, "but we—we sort of confide, don't you know, in fits and starts."

Broggers nodded.

"I see," he said; "and you mean that he hasn't had a fit, or a start, quite lately."

"Oh, wise Broggers!" she smiled.

He leaned across the table and laid a plump hand upon hers.

"I think I should rather like to have you for a mother," he told her; "and so Mr. Wing proposes to live thoroughly up to his name, does he?"

"He writes that London is very full of temptations for an untried youth; and that it is well for a growing and inexperienced lad to have a pure and simple home life to protect him from its many pitfalls."

She showed him the letter, and Broggers stroked his chin.

"I could wish that he had merely thought all that," he said presently.

She looked up at him again quickly.

"Do you know, I felt just the same thing," she told him; "but, on second thoughts, I am happier to feel that Robin will perhaps be guarded a little."

"Where are the children now?" asked Broggers irrelevantly.

Esther went over to the window, and opening it, pointed to a distant meadow.

"They're shooting rabbits on the glebe farm," she said. "I can see Margaret's red tammy. She's carrying the ferret bag for them, I expect, and taking care of the dog."

"Lazy young beggars," said Broggers beneath his heaviest frown.

"But I think she rather likes it, all the same," smiled Esther.

Broggers came over beside her, and inserted a trio of fat fingers between his lips. Then he leaned out of the window, and blew a blast through them that seemed for a moment to spread a shocked dumbness down the entire valley. The effort appeared to give him satisfaction, for he repeated it, with an almost equal success, turning to Esther for approval.

"That wasn't so bad for a middle-aged bachelor of tottering constitution, was it?" he asked. "I haven't done that for years."

But Esther had put her hands to her ears.

"And I hope you'll never, never do it again," she said.

He turned up his collar, and went out, gaitered and

muffled against the January mists that now, upon a falling temperature, were rising up from the river's surface. And by an open gate he confronted Lomax, who laid a hand upon his arm.

"There's one of your unpaintable pictures," he said, pointing a lean finger down the hedge.

For a moment Broggers had lost sight of the two boys and the attendant red tammy; but now, pulled gently from the concealment of a towering elm tree, he saw the whole little drama set out before his eyes; Chris, upon the opposite side of the hedge, broad in the shoulder, taller by a head than the intervening brambles; Robin, unformed still, and slenderer, with his gun balanced half-way towards his shoulder; and Margaret, stooping a little, with one hand clasped round an empty sack, and the other, brown and ungloved, resting upon the old retriever's collar.

The eyes of them all were upon the burrows farther down; and their cheeks, half turned away and heedless of the wind, were pink and glowing. Of Chris they could see very little; and he had grown into a somewhat phlegmatic young man, who deserved, as Broggers frequently told him, no gentler a fate than to become a frock-coated sawbones. But the two younger ones held their eyes, becoming for a moment the central figures in all this little valley, a saga in country clothes, and an unconscious comment upon graver thoughts. For here, and for just the flicker of this single moment, it was as though the great magician, having played the accustomed pieces to a familiar ritual, had snatched suddenly at some hoary veil, and hey presto! behold the very core of Youth incarnate. It triumphed upon their parted lips; it triumphed in each line and shadow and half-lit suggestion of their young bodies' poise; it

triumphed, cruel and frank, in Robin's narrowed eyes; it climbed exultantly upon the pity in Margaret's; a callow Youth, it might be, and untempered by desirable trials, but for this tiny moment throned and dominant—Youth and the hunt, hot blood, and less than a fig for your January mists.

There came a timid trembling of nostrils at the dark outlets of the burrow, and a sudden scurry of brown flanks and white-tipped tails. The guns rang out together; and a pale-eyed ferret blinked disappointedly into the daylight.

"Oh, damn it!" cried Robin, "I've missed 'em again."

And so the moment passed.

Chris peered over the hedge. He had killed regularly with every shot. Margaret stretched back her stiffened shoulders.

"You're pretty feeble to-day," she told Robin; and then all three of them caught sight of their observers. And there was so much to tell Broggers, who had been spending an annual visit to the North of England, so many details of these great days of liberty from medicine, from school, from governesses and music lessons, that before the merest unintelligible fraction of it had been brought beneath his notice the bells of Blend tolled five across the darkening meadows.

Lomax was for compelling them all to come back with him to the rectory, where Margaret would pour out tea, but Robin, in a spirit of duty, went up the lane to his mother's little house; so that for the first time, in a somewhat inconsequent history, the hero takes the foreground to at least one observer.

And in this tiny drawing-room from which the daylight had already very nearly faded, it might have

been rather an elder sister who smiled a greeting to him now from her chair beside the fire. For Esther Rivers, in spite of her seventeen-year-old marriage, had contrived to make such excellent friends with Youth that now it companioned her still, would never, indeed, altogether desert her; and had set but one penalty among many blessings.

But it was this that would sometimes pencil a furrow across her smooth forehead when she regarded Robin. For there were times when it seemed to her that he did not take her motherhood quite seriously enough; just as if motherhood were not the most serious and wonderful phenomenon in all the world. And though she had rounded her little confession to Broggers with a laugh, so that he had taken it as evidence of a tender worldly wisdom, in reality her relations with Robin were not altogether free from a certain clinging dissatisfaction. For it seemed to her that there should be moments, at any rate, when this loose-limbed and lazily impulsive boy of hers should put his arms about her neck and pour out to her his inmost aspirations; whereas his embraces were almost briefer than his confessions. And it was a little hard, when she would so have loved to be author, and critic, and privileged applauder, all in one, to remain properly contented with an occasional peep from the gallery into the theater of her son's emotions.

So, too, upon this evening, at this brink of a new step in life, it would have been surely no more than natural to expect some slender tribute of his confidence. And instead he merely kissed the tip of her nose, and talked about rabbits.

Well, it was the law of the march, she supposed, and as the graybeards at the wayside inn, so she also

must learn to be sufficiently rewarded with a wave of the hand, or a half-turned cheek, or a passing word of chatter. Now and then, perhaps, if she were very fortunate, it might become her high privilege to guide a little (though never to hinder) the trend of these lustier activities. But that would be the price of remembering that the travelers in the dust will only share their real confidences with the comrades at their shoulders, and never with the watchers by the road.

She began to realize this more than ever to-night, as presently the darkness deepened upon the valley. For there, at the end of the garden, stood Robin and Margaret; and soon she saw them crossing the fields towards the boat-house. Presently, as she guessed very well, they would ferry themselves over the stream and climb the hill upon the opposite side. And Robin's secrets to-night would be told to another.

And yet if Esther, too, had climbed the hill, she would have found perhaps less cause for jealousy than her imagination was conjuring up for her on the humbler side of the river; for, though this might be a somewhat special evening, and even worthy, from an historical standpoint, of its separate chronicle among the foundations of this narrative, Margaret's share in it was at best fragmentary, and even (just a little bit) humiliating. But then how should Margaret understand exactly what was happening to Robin to-night? For to-night he was standing where she, of course, would never have to stand, at a parting of the ways, or rather, indeed, at the complete obliteration of this older and unquestioned footpath that he had heretofore trodden; at the unfolding, in its stead, of a

strange and more strenuous thoroughfare that must lead him—who could tell whither?

"And it's a jolly solemn consideration," he informed her.

"Rather!" said Margaret.

His brow grew heavily serious.

"It's not as if we were kids any longer, you see," he proceeded.

"Rather not!" said Margaret, feeling at her first hairpins.

"Of course," he explained, "I should have preferred to go into the army to anything else, you know. At least, I think I should."

"Poor old Robin!"

He bestowed a brief glance upon her.

"You needn't pity me," he observed. "Every fellow has something to put up with, and this is my lot, I suppose. I expect it will be pretty beastly though, all the same."

Margaret was silent.

"And yet," he reflected, "I'm not altogether sorry about it, you know. It'll be rather decent to be up there in London, earning one's own—er—income, making a start in life, and mixing with the people who matter (poor Margaret!), and besides I can't help feeling that my life up to the present has been rather too much of a—well, a game, sort of, don't you know."

They had crossed the river by now, and were climbing up through the fringe of wood that skirted the bottom of the hill, a sky of headlong clouds above them that contained no moon and shut away all wider views from their eyes. As they reached higher ground the fuller force of the wind blew her against him, so that

her skirts fluttered about his legs, and he could feel her body braced against his own. Once, too, she stumbled upon a tuft of tangled grass, though it did not occur to either of them at the moment that he might have held out his hand to her. Presently they reached the top of the hill, the center of a vague circumference of shadows, with the whole pageant of marching clouds set out before their eyes, blotting themselves up into battlements against the clearer starlight, or toppling, with a nonchalant serenity, into the gulf at the sky's brim. Low down in the east there shone across the darkness a dull belt of yellow light, reflected from the lamps of Reading; and for a moment or two they stood there, with their faces turned towards it.

"Of course," continued Robin, "if one can't do what one likes, the great thing is to make money, and the only way to do that nowadays is to go into business."

He stretched himself, leaning back a little, with his shoulders against the wind.

"I've lived long enough on mother," he said. "It'll be ripping to go up there and make some money, and when I'm rich——"

He became silent, his thoughts moving out beyond the reach of words. For now in very truth all things had become different. He was breathing already in a larger and more liberal air. The puppet days had vanished behind him; and to-night he was at the gates of life itself. It was an inspiring thought, for though he knew very little about this particular career that was so soon to claim him, yet the first steps were alike in them all. There would be a few years of probation, for example, and to-night they seemed wonderfully

brief. They would be followed, he supposed, by a few years of struggle. And they would be crowned, he was quite certain, with an ultimate success, hard won, maybe, but golden and indubitable.

And as he stood there, with his eyes upon this wavering light, behold—an extraordinary vision—but yet behold all London at his feet, pulsing and immense, and crammed to its last horizon with the splendor of its possibilities. Then the little cottage down there in the valley shrank suddenly to strange proportions, and became, with his mother and the girl at his side, the merest atom in this cosmos that surrounded him. Battle? Yes, there would be lots of battle. There was battle even now in the sky above his head—a turmoil of tears and glory, marching down there towards London. But what of battle? He welcomed it, feeling himself strong. And now, with the sense of his manhood still fresh upon his shoulders, there came to his lips all manner of high resolves, half clothed, it might be, in broken words, but for the most part too vague (or sacred perhaps) to be paraded in any definite terms. And it would have been hard, surely, to imagine a braver sky than this, that bore witness to their birth, a tattered, invincible sky, with its tumult overtopped by a star.

Alone at his garden gate, however, with his first pipe clasped between his teeth, it occurred to him suddenly that he had perhaps been a little too communicative. He ran back to the rectory and threw up a pebble against Margaret's bedroom window.

Margaret, standing pensively upon bare feet, was fastening up her nightgown before the looking-glass, her hair drawn back and plaited for the night into a

pigtail. She was not very pretty, she reflected, though one of the girls at school had once told her that she had got nice eyes.

"He might have given me a hand, when I nearly tumbled," she thought; and then she began to laugh at herself. "How silly I am," she said, with her lips to the candle, "and I was just going to forget to say my prayers."

It was then that Robin's pebble tinkled upon the window-pane. She looked out at him, her brown hair black in the darkness, and her nightgown ghostly about her shoulders.

"Look here," said Robin, "don't tell anybody what I said."

"Rather not!" she whispered.

CHAPTER III

WHICH LOOKS OUT OF A TOP-FLOOR WINDOW

THUS it was that, at half-past six o'clock upon the evening of his longest day (but one), Robin found himself sitting upon Mr. Wing's right hand and surveying the four other persons with whom he shared the table.

"There's no meal like high tea," said his host genially, "and I hope you are ready to do it justice."

He lifted the point of his carving-knife from the leg of mutton before him and indicated the lady who presided over the tea-urn at the opposite end of the table. She was of middle height, Robin gathered, rather thin in the face, with a decided mouth, bright eyes, and grayish hair.

"My sister Bertha," he explained. "Mr. Rivers, Miss Wing."

Miss Wing bowed a little above the tea-cups, and glanced appraisingly at Robin. The knife point flickered round to the left, and led Robin's eyes to a fresh-colored boy, with dark hair, an incipient mustache, and a rather long neck, emphasized by the low turned-down collar that, in common with the rest of the male members of the family, it was his habit to wear.

"We have so much talking to do," Mr. Wing explained to Robin once, "that we cannot afford to pamper our throats."

Now he said—

"My second son, Ralph—your distant cousin. He is at present in the tea business, and in a sense therefore one of your future colleagues."

Ralph half rose from his seat and nodded heartily at Robin.

"Glad to meet you," he said.

"The empty chair on his right," proceeded Mr. Wing, "is usually occupied by my daughter Betty; but on Wednesdays she is very frequently late, as she conducts a Bible class at Hoxton in the afternoon and often visits in the neighborhood afterwards."

"They are very fond of her in Hoxton," commented Miss Wing.

The knife went round at a right angle, and there was perhaps the least inflection of pride in Mr. Wing's next remark.

"My eldest son, Peter," he observed, "who has lately been admitted into the Free Church ministry."

Peter, who was sitting opposite to Robin, was an eager-eyed young man with high cheekbones and a square jaw. He stretched his hand across the table and caught the ends of Robin's fingers in a muscular grip.

"Glad to make your acquaintance," he said, with the same warmth of expression that had been noticeable in his younger brother.

"The empty chair beside you," continued Mr. Wing, "belongs to my youngest boy, Jim, but on Wednesday nights he also is very often late, as he has to give an address to a men's guild in Barnsbury in connection with our church."

"And the poor boy had got such a cold, too," said Miss Wing. "Don't you think, my dear——?"

There was a moment's silence while Mr. Wing pro-

nounced grace, and this being concluded, he rounded his introductions with a general comment.

"You will see that we are rather a busy family," he observed to Robin.

"And a hungry one, too, at this time of day," smiled Peter, with a portion of mutton poised half-way upon his fork.

"I hope you have got a fairly good appetite," said Miss Wing, giving Robin a maiden opportunity of joining in the conversation.

"Oh, yes," he said; "I'm generally pretty hungry."

"A fair breakfast, a light lunch, and a solid high tea," observed Mr. Wing—"that's the invariable rule of this household, Rivers; and Ralph shall show you to-morrow the bun-shop where he gets his midday snacks."

"And we breakfast at seven-thirty, prayers at seven-fifteen," added Miss Wing, leaning forward a little, and speaking in a tone of half-apology that Robin subsequently discovered to be habitual. "I hope that the hour is not too early for you."

"Not a bit," murmured Robin politely.

"You see," she explained, "some of the boys like to take a walk before business."

"I often walk all the way down to the city," said Ralph. "It saves bus fares, and it helps to keep one in health. It takes me forty-seven minutes. I'll show you the way if you like."

"Thanks very much," said Robin; and in the period that followed of more complete attention to the meal before them his eyes found furtive opportunities to gather some further impressions.

The house that had thus become his temporary home, "a home *from* home," as Mr. Wing had cor-

dially defined it, was one in a row of large and similarly constructed residences facing south upon a thoroughfare frequented by one line of omnibuses, but otherwise sufficiently private. Externally, he had been aware, as he arrived, of a certain dust-colored uniformity punctuated by necessary windows. He had ascended by four steps to a front door placed solidly between two cream-tinted classical pillars; and a careless cabman had dropped his hat-box into an area below. He had been dimly conscious, too, of a couple of window-boxes containing some small evergreen shrubs.

The hall he would always remember very distinctly, since he had waited there for two or three minutes before Mr. Wing had emerged from his study; and it had reminded him of one of the landings at school, the floor being protected with linoleum, upon which were set, at convenient angles, an umbrella-stand, a hat-rack, and three mahogany chairs. The staircase leading up from this to the higher stories of the house was also spread with linoleum, similar in color and design to that in the main hall and held in place by a series of very shiny stair-rods. It was so arranged, also, that the horizontal portion covering each stair contained a similar fragment of the general pattern, a central urn, with some birds of an indefinite species poised upon its either side, the whole scheme being inclosed between two lateral strips of rosebuds.

Upon one of the walls he observed a large map of London, and beside it a railway-guide, suspended from a nail, with a written notice above it requesting borrowers to return it at once. The other wall was bare; and dominating the whole, dominating even a sudden odor of boiling vegetables that came up to him from

the kitchen stairs, there prevailed an indefinite suggestion of some antiseptic household soap.

And now, looking about him, it would seem that these first impressions were by no means incongruous with the admirably practical appearance of the room, in which he was sitting. For though two armchairs and a sofa were among the more conspicuous of its pieces of furniture, these displayed no evidences of any easy custom and were unadorned by either cushions or antimacassars.

Into one of the corners there projected the wooden framework of a kitchen-lift, designed to lighten the work of the domestics by conveying the necessary dishes to and from the dining-room. The fireplaces were filled with asbestos, and while the front windows looked out upon the street, the back ones displayed a small garden, wherein, as he discovered afterwards by daylight, were set a vaulting-horse and the skeleton of a disused swing. This had been once of a light-blue color, but had been tempered by rain and wind to a pealed and mottled purple.

From his seat at the table he could see two pictures upon the opposite wall, and one of these was the framed enlargement of a photograph of Mr. Wing himself, a broad, but not stout, figure, with a countenance that displayed the square jaw, straight nose, and level eyes that Robin had observed in both his sons. The mouth was perhaps a little more firmly molded than theirs, but this would be merely an evidence of time; and, save for two very small side-whiskers, the face was entirely clean-shaven. Indeed, the only feature to which the photograph had necessarily failed to do justice was the confident and healthful complexion that again he would seem to have be-

stowed upon his children. Taken in all, the brisk vitality of this portrait seemed rather to overshadow the more pensive appeal of its neighbor, exhibiting the bent head of an eminent Nonconformist divine.

Mr. Wing, looking up from his plate, caught the direction of Robin's glance.

"Ah, you have heard him perhaps?" he suggested.

But Robin shook his head.

"In his early days he was our minister here in Highbury; but he has gone far since then, very far."

"Oh," said Robin, and added pleasantly, but without any great conviction, "I see."

Miss Wing bent forward a little.

"I think," she observed, "that you and your mother are Anglicans, are you not?"

"I beg your pardon!" said Robin, coloring a little.

"Anglicans," apologized Miss Wing. Robin was somewhat at a loss.

"I—I'm afraid I don't know," he stammered.

Already, for some unaccountable reason, he had become growingly conscious within himself of a certain failure to create the impression that he would have desired. And now, when Peter leaned over the table towards him, speaking through smiling lips, he felt his cheeks turning hotter than ever.

"Denomination," said Peter, "makes very little difference, doesn't it, when our hearts are right?" and the inflection of his voice appeared vaguely to join hands with a certain challenge in his eyes.

And now it seemed to Robin as though all the while there had been lurking behind this strenuous hospitality some tentative inquiry that not until this moment had pushed itself into speech. It was as though they had been asking him silently, "Is *your* heart right?"

It was even as though he had been judged already by some unseen and tacit standard—judged, and found wanting.

He gulped down a piece of bread and marmalade and looked confusedly across the table into the cool face opposite to him. He was conscious, too, of the fastening upon him of Mr. Wing's keenest regard.

"No," he stammered, "yes, I mean."

There was a minute's silence. Mr. Wing picked up his knife and fork. Ralph moved his cup upon its saucer.

"Have you a congenial ministry at Blend?" asked Miss Wing. "So many of our smaller villages——"

"Old Lomax is an awful good sort," blurted out Robin.

"So many of our smaller villages," proceeded Miss Wing, tactfully ignoring his interruption, "are extremely badly off in that respect."

"Lomax?" questioned Peter. "Do you mean Arthur Lomax?"

Robin nodded, just a little bit too eagerly perhaps.

"Do you know him then?" he asked.

"Is that the critic?" queried Mr. Wing.

Peter nodded.

"Do you know him?" repeated Robin.

"Only by his books," said Peter, a little ominously—"the outsides of them."

But Robin's eye was still bright.

"I didn't know he had written any books," he said.

"But he's a jolly good artist. He was a chaplain in Paris once, you know. He and Broggers were the pater's greatest pals. They live quite close to us."

"Broggers?" frowned Miss Wing. "Isn't that rather an unusual name?"

Robin laughed.

"It's only a nickname, of course," he said. "His real name's Brogham. But everybody calls him Broggers."

Mr. Wing rose from his chair.

"We have prayers at a quarter to nine," he told Robin, "when you will hear two bells."

As they filed from the room Ralph laid a friendly hand upon Robin's shoulder.

"Come up and have a talk in my room," he said.

They went upstairs, passing on the way the schoolroom, a plainly furnished apartment over which at this moment a gas stove was shedding a bluish-white radiance. Through the open doorway they could see two series of shelves upon which were arranged the text-books that the three boys had found it necessary to master in order to matriculate at the London University. In another corner of the room stood a little pile of further volumes that Peter had studied for his B.A. degree.

"Peter's the learned one, you know," said Ralph.

Next door to the schoolroom was a smaller room containing a harmonium.

"Do you play at all?" asked Ralph, but Robin shook his head. Upon the third floor, they opened the door into Ralph's bedroom, and here, for the first time, Robin found himself in an atmosphere that was at any rate not entirely unfamiliar.

For this might almost have been his own study at school; and upon an oil stove in the corner a kettle was humming cheerfully to the music of alfresco meals.

"Have some cocoa," said Ralph; and as he moved about the room collecting the necessary materials, the

boys drew together a little upon common grounds, exchanging comments and comparing and contrasting experiences. Ralph had been to a day-school, whereas Robin, for as long almost as he could remember, owing to traveling parents, had been at one boarding-school or another. He examined the photographs of one or two cricket groups.

"I always think," said Ralph, "that it must be so much harder for a fellow to stick to his colors at a boarding-school."

"Stick to his what?" asked Robin absently.

Ralph looked up quickly from the stove, but Robin was turning over the pages of a book.

"I mean when fellows tell beastly stories, and that," he said.

Robin chuckled.

"We had an awful funny chap in my last bedder," he said. "But, I say, what's all this about?"

Upon the edge of the dressing-table stood a globe, black as night, except for a slender segment that shone out very white by contrast. Ralph handed him a cup of cocoa.

"That's the proportion of heathens in the world to Protestants," he explained.

"Jolly interesting," said Robin, without enthusiasm.

"I'm a College Volunteer, you know," added Ralph irrelevantly.

Robin seated himself upon the edge of the bed, sipping his cocoa.

"We had rather a good corps at school," he said.

"Oh, I don't mean that sort of thing," laughed Ralph. He tapped the little globe, so that it twinkled round upon its axis very easily.

"I mean a missionary volunteer. We're going to evangelize the world in this generation, you know," he explained.

Robin stared at him.

"But I thought that you were in the tea business," he said dubiously.

"Only for two years," said Ralph. "Because father believes in everybody having a business training. Besides, I'm only twenty-one, you know."

Miss Wing closed the door of her brother's study with rather more than usual care.

"My dear," she said, "I was standing by the window. And the window was open. And when the cabman dropped his hat-box I distinctly heard him say"—she lowered her voice—"say '*damn.*'"

Mr. Wing looked up at her over his spectacles.

It was some little time since his sister had exhibited so much suddenness; and it was obvious now that her feelings had been overlong pent up.

"I'm afraid, Bertha," he deprecated, "that the language of our cabmen is often most deplorable."

"But I don't *mean* the cabman," said Miss Wing, with a heightened color in her cheeks. "And I'm thinking—what about the servants?"

It was one of these that knocked a moment later upon the door of Ralph's bedroom.

"If you please, sir," she announced, "Panton's waitin' in the 'all, sir."

Ralph's face lit up, and he told her to send the boy upstairs to him.

"I should like you to meet Panton," he said to Robin. "He's one of my vanboys from Islington."

He's such a good chap. I was the means of his conversion last summer, you know."

He spoke entirely without self-consciousness, and there came a sound of ascending footsteps.

"But I think I must really go and unpack," protested Robin.

On the way up to his own bedroom, which was placed upon the topmost floor of all, in the front of the house, he was met vociferously by the youngest son of the family, a broad-shouldered youth, leaping gustily down the staircase. He pulled himself up as he confronted Robin, and shook his hand several times, with something of the boisterous geniality that had made him so acceptable to the guild in Barnsbury.

"Jolly glad to see you, old chap!" he cried. "Jolly glad! Going up to unpack? Want a hand? Manage all right by yourself? Just off to the post. By-by. See you at prayers," and in a series of descending thuds he vanished towards the hall beneath.

And at prayers it was this same young man who officiated, a duty that fell by rotation to the different members of the family, though, as Robin afterwards discovered, Mr. Wing himself invariably led the singing of the hymn. This was sung without the accompaniment of any instrument, the boys forming a lusty bass, to whom Miss Wing and the servants opposed a rather inadequate treble. Following the hymn there came the reading of some verses from the Bible, into which Jim threw an occasional comment, explanatory or devotional, and from which he led, with a deftness that amazed and rather frightened Robin, into a graceful extemporary prayer, the ceremony being concluded within ten minutes.

That Jim had been perhaps more than usually suc-

cessful to-night in his presentation of the family petitions became obvious to Robin from the criticisms that ensued afterwards in the little supper-room at the back of the house. Here it was the custom of the younger members of the family to gather at the end of the day, and over sterilized milk and ginger-nuts to discuss its chief events. The outstanding of these, on the present occasion, would seem to have been an incident in the city counting-house, and an administrative difficulty that had arisen in connection with Jim's guild; and Robin took an early opportunity to withdraw from the argument. .

Seated presently upon his bed, with the door shut upon a tardy opportunity for private reflection, he found himself the shuttlecock of numerous perplexing emotions, of which perhaps the predominant rose from a half-angry conviction of his own callowness and a sense of the obvious contrast that he presented to his new surroundings. He stretched his arms, musing upon these things against his will, and at the same time half inclined to shirk these baffling problems that were now obtruding themselves into his life. From the chest of drawers some photographs of school-friends, and one of his mother, looked strangely into his eyes out of an unfamiliar setting; and besides these there was only one other picture in the room, hung above the door, the representation of a statue by Thorwaldsen of Jesus Christ. He lit a cigarette, and, throwing open the window, leaned out, with his elbows upon the sill, the air blowing fresh against his face from the roof-tops beyond the road.

This room of his was set so high that he could see far away over London, how far he could not tell, since at present all the landmarks were strange to him;

but so far, at any rate, that where the darkness of the sky drooped ultimately upon the darkness of the city it was hard for him to tell if the bright points that shone there quivered from lamps or stars.

And to this distance there converged now, and dwindled, the whole multitudinous host of nearer lights, penciling the city into all manner of shadowy areas, into crescents, and avenues, and squares, the nearer mapped out as by beads, the remoter suggested only by the glare that rose up from the unseen jets beneath. Here and there an arc-light towered gigantic among its fellows, raying an arch or the dark circle of a chimney, a chill brilliance that subdued the lamp-light in the windows opposite to a veiled and crimson softness.

There came up to him the roar of London; and yet perhaps less a roar than a whisper; and yet again something indefinitely between the two, something perfectly sure of itself, the creature of this myriad humanity, but in itself impersonal, something unhurried and complacent, as though far off some leisurely giant were thrumming monotonously upon a harp-string.

It seemed to him that he had caught this same note played upon the tree-tops of Deerlock, but yet never quite like this, for there it had varied with the set of the wind, or the frost in the air, or the mists risen up from the stream; whereas this other would never change till men themselves should change, till the breath of being should die out of them, or the earth yawn, or the seas break over the land. And this was a little surprising, too, when one remembered the unthinkable, conflicting factors that must each be lifting up its tiny quota to the whole; the pulsing of machinery, for instance, the turning of uncountable wheels,

the unwearying pulling to and fro of vans and wagons, the sustained stridor of all these bellowers of wares; and above them the million sharper, sporadic trebles, half-mechanical, of opened windows or shut doors, of flickering cabs, of boots upon the pavement; or again purely human, of the laughter and screaming of men and women, of welcoming, speeding, and reviling, of youth's reveling, of children playing in the byways; and below all these the bed, as it were, upon which they rested, the infinite suppressed blending of undertones, the crooning of mothers to their infants, the soothing of sufferers, pleadings, prayers, tears, the purrings of lust in its secret places.

It was a little hard to believe that all this could be gathered up into a sound as tranquil and unwearied as the beating of a strong man's heart, and yet it must needs be so; and half recognizing this, he became aware in himself of some vague necessity for certain personal readjustments, for adaptation to this mighty environment, for self-repression, for self-assertion, for the acquiring of some unforeseen armament; while at the same time there dawned in him an increasing sense of the infinitely negligible, for which he stood, in relation to this incredible whole. It was scarcely believable, indeed, that only twenty-four hours ago he had been standing on the little hilltop at Blend, with the ball at his feet. For whereas it was only this morning that he had looked out upon the Wrayley platform and waved his hand to Margaret and Broggers, he could see them now, backed by the station flower-beds, æons behind him, dim ghosts of some era past; while from the gulf that seethed between there surged up to him a hundred wrestling impressions of the Lime Street offices, of the narrow

staircases, of the long rows of staring clerks, of the tall spittoons, over which stood the tasters, rinsing their mouths with tea, of the chief's office with its leather-seated chairs and telephone receivers. He recalled his introduction to the partners, and the assignment to him of his immediate duties. He remembered the windows with their abrupt view of naked house-backs and narrow geometrical skies. Then there had been the journey back to Paddington to fetch his luggage, and the drive thence to Highbury across dull acres of North London streets. He remembered the opening doors of this home from home. He felt very lonely.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" said a voice behind him.

He started suddenly, turning round from the window, and saw in the doorway a girl standing, with a candle in her hand.

"I'm so sorry," she said again; "but I knocked twice, so I thought you couldn't be here."

"It was my fault," said Robin; "I ought to have heard you."

She held out her hand to him.

"I'm Betty," she explained; "and my aunt sent me to see if your room was quite comfortable."

While he looked at her, standing there in front of him, her glance passed him to the open window against which he was leaning. He noticed that she had the same candid eyes and clear coloring that he had remarked in her brothers. He noticed, too, that her voice like theirs was bell-like and direct, but more femininely tender. He thought her face very beautiful; and the circumstance of her coming to him just then lent her grace in his sight.

"You've been admiring the view," she smiled.

"It's the peculiar privilege of these rooms at the top of the house."

"It's a wonderful view," said Robin, forgetting it as he spoke.

"Then you're quite comfortable?" she asked, looking from his face round the room in which they were standing. She lifted the candle a little.

"I see you have brought some photos," she went on. "It makes the room look more cozy, doesn't it? Though I always tell aunty that she should not have banished the loveliest picture in the house away up here." She led his eyes to the figure of Jesus, looking down upon them with its tired eyes and outstretched arms.

"Yes," said Robin, "I like it very much."

"And there's nothing I can give you?" she asked.

"If there is," he said, "I'll ask you for it."

When she had gone he looked out of the window again. The hour grew late, and from the windows opposite the lights died gradually away; from all but one, where now across the intervening shadows he could see the end of a cigarette burning like a glow-worm in the darkness before him.

Already his mood had changed; so that now, looking out again, it was with a warmed and friendlier heart. He watched the little point of light, glowing and fading, poised there from an upper window; and presently he lit a fellow to it. And then a strange thing happened, for soon, dropping his hand a little, he noticed idly that the light opposite had flickered downwards also. He lifted his hand again, and the other, like a ghost of his own, rose up a moment later. He drew a cross and a circle, and they were reflected back to him across the night.

He laughed softly to himself, hazarding guesses at this unsuspected neighbor of whom this was all that he might see.

Presently there was penciled out to him a letter, at first backwards, but in a moment so that he could read it very easily; and following the letter a name; and the name was Judy. Laughing still, he answered it with his own, until, written upon the air, there was sped to him a hasty good-night, trailing off into a falling cigarette end.

"I wonder if she burned her fingers," he said. Probably, he reflected, she would be merely some disobedient servant girl; and the thought disappointed him. Nevertheless, he curled himself presently into bed with a spirit less entirely forsaken. And in his dreams there came out to him, from the tangled millions, these two—a girl with a cigarette between her lips, and at her side this other with the candle in her hand.

"Is there anything we can give you?" they asked him.

But when he would have answered, they had faded again from his sight; and instead there stood before him, with outstretched hands, the downbent figure of the Man of Sorrows.

CHAPTER IV

WHICH CONCERNS A YOUNG WOMAN OF BEAUTY

BUT Judy was far too careful of her fingers to run any risk of burning them; and the faintest tinge of nicotine upon their delicate coloring would have set a wrinkle upon her forehead very nearly as long-lived as the infringing stain. Just now, too, she was taking a somewhat special interest in her fingers. The nail of one of them had been broken a day or two ago; and, while the fracture had been slight, all her filing and polishing had not as yet disguised its presence. The incident had been both painful and annoying; and its result still challenged the pink flawlessness of nine other dainty digits.

From the contemplation of this troubling circumstance, her little dialogue with Robin, shuttling to and fro upon a blowy January darkness, had come as a certain relief. It had been amusing, and incongruous too, when one remembered the reputation of the Wings; and Judy would never have believed that so light a spirit could be harbored beneath their roof-top. She leaned back in her dressing-gown and laughed.

"I wonder who he is," she said.

It would be pleasant to picture Judy as the gay visitor in Robin's slumbers, stepped out from the very heart of Romance. It would be a little nearer the truth, perhaps, to represent her, as afterwards for awhile he came to think of her in the flesh, the last

word in womanly loveliness. But, for the first, as Judy frequently assured herself, she had long ago buried her little share of romance in the dustiest corner of the Mont Parnasse; while, for the second, as she once had occasion to assure Robin, he had really mistaken the apology for the ideal.

At the same time she would have been quite the last to deny the exceptional grace of the substitute. Self-depreciation on such a point would have been both idle and untrue; and, more important still, unprofitable as well, than which there could be no more grievous accusation in her eyes.

For throughout her life, ever since she could remember very nearly, this simple lesson had been impressed upon her intelligence—that bread and butter were the primal necessities of her being, with jam for a desirable and (since the good God had made her nice to look at) a quite possible goal. To this end, therefore, such energies as she possessed were concentrated; and as she was pleased to reflect, she was more fortunate than a good many in having such a comparatively easy means of obtaining it. There were many women who would be only too willing to pay large sums of money for such health and beauty as were hers, merely for the innate joy of their possession; while she, twice blessed, found in them, as well, the source of a satisfactory income.

On the rare occasions when she felt depressed Judy would comfort herself with thinking about this, would stretch her pretty arms before the looking-glass, and yawn perhaps, and tell herself how fortunate a young woman she was.

It was true, no doubt, that she had to bestow more care upon her person than the majority of her sisters

would have thought necessary; but not more, she believed, than most of them would have been very glad to equal. It was true, also, that she had necessarily to observe a somewhat strict habit of life, that she must be simply fed, and naturally dressed, that she must be active and temperate. But then, in spite of sundry opportunities, she had seldom felt any great temptation to be otherwise.

Behold her, then, rounding off her evening's most serious task, clad in her dressing-gown, with a rosy foot clasped in one hand, while with the other she applies a skilled and gentle massage. Behold, then, both shapely feet stretched out before her, regarded critically for a moment, and finally passed as perfect. Listen for the smallest sigh of relief; and see next a rug dragged out into the middle of the floor, the blinds drawn, the long mirror set conveniently, and Judy, emerged now from her wrappings, at gentle exercise before retiring. Behold her bent forwards, bent backwards, bent sideways; behold her crouching, kneeling, waiting to spring, ready for rebuke. Behold her in despair. See her presently erect, head back, and hands outstretched to heaven; and behold her then, palms downward, scattering favors upon earth. Behold her with an arrow at her ear, and a bow full bent upon a rigid arm. Behold her tiptoe and caparisoned with wings. And forgetting time and this Highbury terrace, behold in her a score of fleeting visions of Andromeda in chains, of Rachel weeping for her children, of Helen, of Diana, of Salome before Herod. Behold even such abstract imaginings as Sorrow, and Fear, and Passion, caught momentarily, and imprisoned here in the very exquisite shell of Judy's person.

Jules Bourquin had made his fortune out of Judy; and that was more than ten years ago. Dubroullé and Barron had climbed to fame upon her graceful shoulders; and only last year Jack Castleton had sold her statue to the nation. Judy was in the Louvre twice over; she held water to the thirsty in the Bois de Boulogne; she looked out serene from a bridge-top over the Seine; she stretched a sword above a Liverpool market-place. She was Justice, she was Mercy, she was Cleopatra, and she was Joan of Arc. She had an excellent connection, and had preserved it now for more than a dozen years, with a figure unimpaired, and indeed no more than very gently ripened by the passage of time. And as a result of this she had contrived to amass quite a comfortable little balance at her bank.

She smiled, dropping back into her armchair and regarding herself dispassionately in the glass; and there came back to her the remembrance of the unwilling and rather weary little girl who had posed in the Paris studios. It was her mother (to whom *le bon Dieu*, if there were one, be kind) who had encouraged her in those days, repeating to her patiently the bread-and-butter doctrine that was afterwards to become her creed. And presently when her mother had died this same teaching had received a double emphasis from her father. For taking the sad event as his text, he had set his tremulous hand upon her ten-year-old shoulder, reminding her of the increased obligations that would now devolve upon her. The good mother had gone away, and her little girl must remember that daddy was growing an old man and infirm. He had long ago given up painting the beautiful pictures that nobody would buy; and now, in his

dingy workshop, eked out his days in the designing and repairing of sculptor's tools—a poor living, and insufficient to keep body and soul together.

So Judy, adoring her father, had trotted obediently to one studio and another, enduring the tardy hours in the strength of this holy mission. Sometimes, in a week, she would bring home as much as sixteen francs, and sometimes even twenty; while, for reward, there would dawn, occasionally, rare and never-to-be-forgotten holidays at Versailles or St. Cloud, when her father, tottering genially at her side, would call her his good little daughter, his *p'tit chou*, his staff of life; and would allow her to buy herself little presents out of the money that she had earned.

This was the time when Judy possessed a vague belief that all little girls must pass through a stage when young men with long hair, or young women in dowdy smocks, wanted to put them in pictures or model them into statues. But once, playing in the Luxembourg, she had made friends with some other little girls, the daughters, it appeared, of a respectable wholesale merchant—little girls who knew nothing at all about studios and had never been modeled by anybody.

Judy had supposed at first that this was because they were so rich that they had no need to earn their parents' bread and butter. But presently her father had patted her cheek, and told her that without doubt it was because they were not pretty enough. This was a new idea to Judy, and looking at them again she thought it very probable; and as a corollary to the discovery began for the first time to take a superficial interest in the looking-glass. There had followed a brief period of triumph, that dissolved presently in

tears when these new friends began to avoid her. Judy learned then that really nice little girls were never modeled for money. It was not quite proper; and their parents would prefer that they should not play with mademoiselle any more.

But her father had pulled out a dingy handkerchief, and, wiping her face, had assured her that they were persons of no account, Philistines, *cochons*; and his little daughter mustn't cry any more, or she will spoil her pretty eyes.

Suddenly, when she was about fourteen, she announced that she could not sit for artists any more.

"*Mon Dieu!*" cried her poor father, "and why ever not?"

Judy became aware of the gap in a small *ménage* that may be caused by the untimely removal of a mother. Judy was shy, she said. Her father stroked her hand. It was so foolish then to be shy. Why should she be shy? Was she not the same little girl, only prettier (every day she was growing prettier)—was she not still his own little girl? And was not her father now almost unable to sell any of the tools that he made? Were they to die together in the Seine? And be found in the Morgue? The good God forbid! Judy mustn't be so silly.

So Judy had gone back again, and then one day the little man with the weazened face and all the followers had found her. She was Beauty itself, he told her. And once when he had met her running pell-mell down the street he had caught her by the arm and called her little April—little April, in a windy frock.

"But soon she will be May," he said; and Judy loved him very much.

Sometimes he would lecture about her to his ardent and untidy disciples.

"See," he would say, patting her round knees, "see this tiny cup of shade beneath the inner condyle, and this deeper one on the opposite side, above the slender tendon." He touched it with his finger-tips. "This slender, but so strong, tendon."

"See again," he would tell them, lifting up her arm, "this tiny shadow above her ulnar bone, and this, where her breast folds round into her arm-pit." He pinched it tenderly. "Like a sleepy little rosebud, eh? Ah, there is heaven in those little shadows. Enough, *ma chérie*," and he would let her slip down from the throne. To all of which Judy, knowing nothing of Latin, and very little of heaven, would listen with open amusement, and an amazing innocence.

One day, near her sixteenth birthday, there emerged from the motley crowd of her acquaintances a young Englishman of large proportions and an honest countenance. He was called Bob Herrick, and the others laughed at him because, they said, he would never become an artist. Judy had felt sorry for this, and once ventured to encourage him a little.

"Patience, Monsieur Herrick," she told him, quoting from her father, but lending to the phrase the whole weight of her own brief experience. "Patience, and all will be well."

When Monsieur Bob had finished laughing, he told her with equal gravity that he meant to take her advice; and perhaps Judy would have tea with him. This had been the first of many delicious little meals in the boulevards, where Judy had learned to smoke cigarettes, and been always very proud and happy. And then one day a strange thing had happened, for sud-

denly changing his voice, he asked her to go home with him. Judy shook her head sorrowfully. There was poor father, she reminded him, who would be waiting for his supper. He leaned towards her with eager eyes.

"Look here," he said,—and showed her a little handful of gold and silver coins. Judy's mouth became as round as her eyes.

"*Mon Dieu!*" she whispered, "but you must be very rich."

He laughed.

"See," he told her, "you shall have it all if you will come. You shall have a pretty necklace as well."

"But why?" she asked. If she could, she would come home with him for nothing; but poor father—somebody must get his supper. M. Herrick had turned red then all over his freckled face, and called himself a beast several times; which had been wholly inexplicable to Judy, who understood English almost as well as French.

"I think you are very, very kind to me," she told him earnestly.

It was then that the little fat man whom they all called Broggers had come up to their table; and M. Herrick had bought her a box of bonbons, and told her to run home and be a very good girl.

"I'm always good," said Judy, and presently had related this amusing episode to her father, who agreed with the young man's estimate of himself.

"*Peste!*" he shouted, hitting the table with a shaky fist. "He had good reason. If he were here I would knock him down."

Judy looked dubious.

"But he is so strong," she said.

Judy's father had been a Scotchman by birth, and apparently there had begun to stir in him now some atrophied remnant of a covenanting conscience. He could dabble very easily with his daughter's present comfort. But he would not imperil her immortal soul; or his own either, if he could help it. He read her, therefore, a brief homily on elementary morality, backed up by a little nebulous theology. Judy must go to church on Sundays, he said; and selected for the purpose a Presbyterian place of worship that was not too far away. For three Sundays Judy had attended there very obediently; and then, coming under the influence of an earnest Scotch lady who labored in the Protestant interest, she announced to her father that she desired to become a little sister of the poor.

"My dear," he said, "some day you will become the little wife of a rich man; which is far better."

The lady missionary, venturing bravely into the workshop, had remonstrated with him upon the essential immorality of his daughter's profession and the inevitable chasm to which it must lead.

"Madame," he hiccoughed, "then Beauty is immoral."

Nevertheless the incident had stirred him to further precautionary measures; and it had become known among the ateliers that the master had called Judy his little rosebud; and that her petals must remain unspoiled. And it was the strength of this prevailing whim of public opinion that had so far overcome the prejudices of Paul Dubroullé toward conventional ceremonies as to propose a real *bona fide* marriage to Judy some three years later.

Of all the vagrant spirits in her little circle Dubroullé's had for a long time seemed to her to be the

most daring and virile; and for nearly two years she had worshiped him humbly from afar. Presently he had noticed her—had even, wonderful to relate, seemed to like her a little bit. Then he had painted her picture as no one else had ever painted it before (Bob Herrick had purchased it for a sum that rumor whispered to be colossal); and then, opening the gates of heaven upon her life, he had told her that he loved her. One or two of the Englishmen, Jack Castleton and Herrick, had tried awkwardly, and with a half-ashamed sense of being a little unsportsmanlike, to dissuade her father and herself from the step. "Why the devil isn't Broggers here?" they asked one another, and talked of wiring for him, as if that would have been any good—but Dubroullé was quite too much her reigning monarch, and, being already something of a celebrity, was regarded by her father with favorable, not to say eager, eyes; so that, upon an April morning, they had been married; and Judy had achieved her little pinnacle of romance.

Even remembering what followed, it was hard sometimes to keep from smiling when one thought about those golden, spotless moments. But then one can never live for very long upon a pinnacle; and Judy's stay there had been perhaps more than usually brief.

In a little while there had been revealed to her ignorance the seamier side of the reputation that had been Dubroullé's halo in her girlish imagination. For one day a woman, many years older than Judy, had called upon her with the angry recital of a certain smoldering episode. When she had gone Judy had wept at the infamy, and, sobbing the story presently to her god, had learned from his half-amused lips that it had been a true one. She had dried her eyes

then, telling him that after all it didn't matter, that she was only a stupid little girl, and that their love was big enough and strong enough to swallow it up. At least—wasn't it?—a question so touching that Dubroullé had at once kissed her eyes and her mouth, and made her happy once more, though after a different fashion. But presently this same person had triumphed again—triumphed horribly; and on a black night her husband had reeled back to her, and they had quarreled, and he had struck her with his open hand. Judy's staggering castles had collapsed altogether then—collapsed irretrievably; and she had discovered in herself all manner of new and unsuspected sentiments. For a day she had left him, hiding herself away, with the blow of his fingers still tingling and echoing into the last corner of her wounded consciousness. Then, clutching vaguely at some possible ghost of hope, she had swallowed her pride and come back, meeting him—well, even now she would rather not think about that meeting.

After that she had returned to her father, while Dubroullé, profiting by the experience of his folly in marrying Judy, had renewed life upon less stringent terms with her successor in his affections. He sent Judy a check, and wrote her a letter in which he proposed a certain allowance, two evidences of an innate generosity that Judy had committed hotly to the flames—an act so futile and improvident that her father had failed to survive it by more than a few weeks. And thus it was that, six months later, a strong-minded and disillusioned young woman, Judy had emigrated to England.

Only once had she seen her husband since, meeting him by chance in Kensington Gardens. He was the

guest, he told her, of an art society; and their meeting had been quite friendly, leaving upon Judy a certain final impression of marvel. Was it possible that this well-dressed, rather sallow, and sensual-looking person had been indeed her hero? And had she, in real truth, lain in his arms and thought herself in paradise?

Well, she was wiser now; and it was quite time that she went to bed. She was later than usual to-night; but that would be partly on account of Robin. She looked out between the blinds. There were no lights now in the upper stories of the opposite house; but in Mr. Wing's study the lamp still burned.

"I wonder what they're doing down there," she murmured. "I expect they're praying."

Judy never prayed. Once or twice, when she had felt inclined for the exercise, it had not met with any great success.

"Et maintenant," she observed, with a weatherwise glance at the sky, "je n'en vois plus la nécessité"; and she closed the blinds again.

"It's a risky experiment, perhaps," said Mr. Wing, as he and Peter rose from their knees, "for the boy is obviously not a true Christian. But he is young, and I think impressionable. We must deal with him tactfully, Peter; but at the same time we must be satisfied with nothing less than a real, sound, out-and-out Conversion. The task may prove difficult; but prayer and this" (he rapped his knuckles upon the Bible) "can do most things, Peter."

Peter held out his hand.

"You're always such a help to a fellow, father," he said; and they bade one another good-night.

CHAPTER V

"LA FILLE À LA PORTE"

THOUGH there are some portions of this little drama that would always, perhaps, remain somewhat obscure to him, Chris would nevertheless claim to be considered as a lay figure, pawn, peg, or what you will that was not without some mission in its progress.

"And, though you mightn't think it," he confessed, some years later, to Margaret, "it was the tip of your satin slipper that first awakened me to the weal possibilities of life."

"Nonsense," said Margaret's eyes.

"I'd have kissed it for much less than twopence," he pursued.

"Kissed my toe?" incredulously.

"Why not? I'll bet Wobin has. Now, hasn't he?"

This would have been about the time when the little Robin was still trailing his clouds of glory; and Margaret bent above his cradle. It is probable that she would have liked to convey an appearance of anger, or at any rate of dignity; but, instead, it is to be feared that she achieved merely an impression of general pinkness. And besides, to be perfectly honest, she had thought at the time that it *was* rather a sweet slipper.

Chris would hold, further, that his importance as a *persona dramatis* consisted chiefly in the facts that his flat was conveniently near to Paddington Station, and

that the one immediately below it was occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Castleton. It was indeed Jack Castleton who had persuaded him to take it when, on leaving Cambridge and finding himself a ward no longer, and possessed of a certain small income of his own, he had come up to London to prosecute his medical studies. And now, six months later, he had so little regretted the step that he fully believed himself to be the fortunate possessor of the pleasantest apartments in Bayswater. His parlor faced south upon a road that ran parallel with the park, but was here interrupted by a side street; so that a little vista of prosperous houses led up to a soft background of flower-beds and trees. Moreover, Mrs. Pollock, his housekeeper, if she might not, perhaps, set the prevailing standard, could at any rate keep abreast of it. Sometimes she would boast a little about this; and as a result there were no shinier door-handles in the neighborhood, or any windows more responsive to a slanting sunlight.

And thus it was that, upon this April evening, with the blinds drawn and the dinner-table cleared, with his feet in the fender, and his coffee at his elbow, Chris yawned contentedly into the fire. He was not going out anywhere to-night, and remained, consequently, in his pink shirt and morning tweeds, with the substitution of a striped blazer for his everyday jacket. He felt very happy, and such thoughts as he allowed himself were uniformly agreeable. A fortnight ago, for example, his hospital had won the Rugger cup, and it had fallen to his lot to obtain the critical try. That was pleasant to think about, but at the same time it was pleasant also to reflect upon pastimes to come, very nearly as genial, and a good deal less strenuous. It was pleasant to consider that soon he would be

spending Easter at Whinchurch; and to form a lazy forecast of the summer to follow. It was pleasant to remember that there were no examinations upon his horizon more immediate than that of next Christmas. He sank deeper into his chair. It was pleasant to be large, and healthy, and well-fed. It was pleasant, indeed, to be alive upon such an extraordinarily pleasant planet. It was pleasant—should he poke the fire, or merely kick it? He would poke it—no, he would kick it. It was pleasant——

“So ho!” scoffed somebody upon the hearthrug, “and here’s a sorrowful picture of a worn-out student. Here’s poor pallid Research exhausted with her labors.”

Chris started up in his chair, but found his eyes held fast beneath the clasp of ten cool fingers. He put up his hands and encircled a pair of youthful wrists. He looked up into two laughing eyes.

“Poor hard-worked boy,” pitied Margaret.

“Now, when I was your age,” observed Broggers, “when I was your age, I—I——”

He looked helplessly at Margaret.

“What did I do?” he wondered.

“I’m afraid I’ve forgotten,” said Margaret solemnly. Chris sat up and rubbed his eyes.

“So sorry we disturbed you,” said his uncle.

“But, I say,” said Chris, “this is whipping, you know.”

He unwound himself and stood up beside Broggers, conscious now that both his visitors were in evening dress, and that Margaret was looking wonderfully grown-up. He noticed the white fur upon the collar of her cloak, and that it made her hair look darker than usual. He saw a rose in her hair.

"I'll order some coffee for you," he said, and dived out through the open door.

Returning presently, with his hair brushed and wearing a jacket that matched his suit, he felt himself to be at less of a sartorial disadvantage; and by then Margaret had assumed the attitude to which reference has already been made. She was sitting, that is to say, upon the arm of his easy-chair, in a somewhat tomboy fashion, with her legs crossed and the tip of a satin toe appearing beneath her skirt.

"I'm so awfully sowwy," apologized Chris, excusing a comfortable disorder of pipes and photographs. "But you never told me you were coming, you know."

"There are no joys," said Broggers, "like the unexpected ones."

Chris was surveying the details of Margaret's frock.

"That's twue," he agreed. "But, I say, you're both looking fearfully wespectable. Where have you been?"

Broggers sighed.

"You see before you," he observed to his nephew, "you see before you a parable of life. You behold Modernity triumphant. You behold Maturity in ashes. You see middle-age dragged like a small boy at the virago heels of Youth. You behold me, in brief, at Margaret's chariot wheel."

"We've been dining at Lady Herrick's," explained Margaret, "to see Bob's Academy bronzes. I think they're most awfully feeble. I'm sure they won't get in. But the old lady simply worships them, you know."

Chris grinned.

"And now he's taking me to see the Castletons."

Broggers lifted his eyes toward the ceiling.

“ By Pan and Syrinx,” he cried, “ by all the nymphs of Deerlock, she puts the blame upon me; oh, Margaret, Margaret!”

“ I haven’t seen Lilah since she married, you know,” said Margaret.

And it was just then that Robin came in.

“ Good Lord!” said Chris; “ it’s like acting a play. Here have you left me alone in my wretchedness for thwee solid months; and now you all come in at once. Enter hewo left—cwosses center. Have some coffee.”

It will be remembered that, if Chris’ later statement is to be believed, he must already by now have been pushed delicately into the region of finer appreciation. He therefore observed that, whereas Broggers greeted Robin after his usual manner, Margaret would seem to have donned a somewhat unfamiliar one for the occasion. His first fleeting impression of her grown-upness returned again as he beheld her hand outstretched to Robin.

“ How do you do?” she said to him.

“ Hullo!” said Robin, “ funny thing meeting you here.”

Chris also perceived, about the same time, that Robin’s personal appearance had hardly changed for the better during these past three months. The collar of his coat was dusty, and his elbows shone a little. His trousers were unbrushed, and there was half a sheet of notepaper folded, clerk-fashion, over each of his cuffs. Chris remembered his own rather becoming garments, and became conscious of unmanly comparisons. Robin had grown curiously pasty-faced, too, and there was a pimple upon one of his cheeks. Nor were his manners quite easy. Chris wondered if these things accounted at all for Margaret’s rather

notable restraint. Of course, girls thought such a lot about mere outward appearances. But it was a little hard on Robin. Yes, it was jolly hard on Robin.

"You old slacker!" he said; "why haven't you been to see me before?"

"Slacker?" said Robin, with his fingers upon his first quarter's salary. "I'm not a slacker. I've been very busy."

"Overworking a little, eh?" queried Broggers, looking at him. "You mustn't do that, you know; must he, my nephew?"—excellent advice, that he reiterated upon their way downstairs to the Castletons' flat.

In a rather shy three years at school, Lilah Castleton had been Margaret's chief friend; but since then, drifting on to the stage for a year or two, and finally marrying Jack Castleton, the rising young sculptor, she had passed a little out of her life. And now, for a moment, Margaret stood hesitating, wondering how far this girlish friendship had survived. But, seeing her in the doorway of their studio, Lilah ran forward with both hands outstretched to greet her, her face burned to a chestnut brown from her winter's honeymoon in Capri.

"Oh, Margaret," she said, "how jolly it is to see you again, and everybody, and to be back in England! And how well you're looking. Yes, we *are* pretty brown, aren't we? And, look at Jack! he's positively negroid. I think he looks simply horrid—and people turn round and stare at us in the street, you know. And now you must tell me what you think of the Capri statue. It has to go in next week. And Lord

Farnham was here this afternoon. And I believe he's going to buy it. Isn't it lovely? Because then you see Jack will be able to do without so many saints. He hates doing saints. And, besides, it's almost wicked, isn't it—pot-boiling saints?”

They spread out about the studio, examining and admiring, Broggers with his arm in Jack's.

Ever since he had met him, an enthusiastic youth, ten years ago, in Paris, Broggers had taken a warm interest in young Castleton's progress towards fame, and had lent his hearty, though disguised, approval to his marriage last autumn with Margaret's school-friend. And now, as they went round the studio, he could detect very easily the steps of his upward march. Ever since the beginning, his work had never been without its hint of beauty; and here, upon all sides, were plentiful evidences of a growing mastery of technique.

“Such as this,” said Broggers, before a marble panel; “it's the best thing here, Jack. New, too, isn't it?”

“Finished last week,” said Jack.

“But it's not the best thing here,” said Robin over their shoulders; “at least”—he began to look a little confused—“at least, I don't think it is.”

“You don't, eh?” asked Broggers; “and what the——”

He stopped short with his mouth open.

“Why, by George!” he said, “I'd clean forgotten.”

He put a hand upon Robin's shoulder, and twisted him round, looking him up and down.

“Of course,” he cried, “there was your man.”

“Are you a sculptor, too?” smiled Jack.

For a moment Robin had become the center of at-

tention, and now he stood there, coloring, and crumbling some dry clay between his fingers.

"I haven't done any since then. That was a long time ago," he explained.

Broggers tapped his forehead.

"Now that's an extraordinary thing," he said. "Fancy forgetting all about it. Why didn't you remind me of it, some of you? I remember now. You brought it to me on the day of your father's death."

"There wasn't any drawing, you see, or anything of that sort at my other school," said Robin, "and I haven't thought about it since."

"It was quite a good little figure, too," reflected Broggers.

"It was the weal thing," said Chris. "I wonder what happened to it."

"Well," said Jack, still smiling, "which is the best thing, then?"

Robin pointed to a corner, wherein a lamp, set upon a bracket, shone up against the painted figure of a girl.

"I like that best," he said; and his conviction led the eyes of the others to it—to the radiant eyes of the young girl who stood there in the picture, with her hand upon an opening door. The arrangement of this portrait may, perhaps, have been a little faulty, may have shown evidences of a certain immaturity of touch; but by a common impulse they had to pay homage in it to the one thing more that lifts workmanship to greatness. And at first there was a laugh from Jack and his wife, because this was not Jack's work at all; so that Robin's compliment was at the best a poor one.

"All the same," he said, "you're quite right, you know."

But Broggers was grave.

"Yes," he agreed slowly, "the boy's right, Jack." He stepped a little nearer to the picture. "I haven't seen this since Bob took it away from Paris. Where has he been hiding it, I wonder? I haven't seen it for years."

"Nor had I," said Jack, "till last week, when Bob asked me to look after it for a day or two. He's been persuaded to send it to a Loan Exhibition in the East End; said he couldn't trust it at his mother's."

This was the picture "La Fille à la porte" that ten years ago had set Dubroullé in the first rank of the coming men; that in the eyes of his own particular friends had been the complete justification of a somewhat checkered career, and a sufficient reply to all prudish critics. By reason also of a certain virginal freshness, of a riant and innocent enthusiasm, it remained perhaps the least characteristic of all his works.

"If he hadn't been so damnably clever, his beastliness would have spoilt it," said Jack.

"Is it an old picture, then?" wondered Chris. "It looks quite fresh."

"Don't you see who it is?" Lilah said to him. "Don't you see that it's Judy?"

Judy was one of Jack's models, and Chris had met her in his studio several times.

"Good Lord!" he said; "so it is. But——"

"Poor Judy!" said Lilah.

"Judy," repeated Robin. "How funny. I——" He stopped.

"D'you know her, then?" asked Chris. But Robin shook his head; and they stood there for another

minute or two in silence, yielding after their different fashions to this spell of genius that shone down to them from the lamp-lit canvas; to the spell of these dancing eyes, half careless, yet wholly worshipping. And to Broggers there came back, like a flood, the memory of the two winter holidays, prolonged into many months, when, with Lomax as his host, he had been fêted in this little backwater of enthusiasts, fêted, and babbled to, and given all sorts of unhealthy meals at the most preposterous hours. How well he had loved them, too, and how he had laughed at them, and bought their pictures. And how many times, he wondered, had he not been dubbed a Philistine, and carried off by force to some neighboring tavern, to be presently acquitted there in consideration of many bottles of *lachrima christi*, the loathsome sweet wine that they particularly affected.

They had spread far and wide since then, scattered to all ends of the world. Some of them he had lost altogether; a few remained merely as names, cropping up, now and again, in the pages of the illustrated magazines, or upon the walls of picture galleries, but no longer known to him in the flesh; others, whom he still visited from time to time, were living, or valiantly endeavoring to live, their old Paris life in changed surroundings at Chelsea. Some of these had become merely grotesque; two or three, still laboring greatly, were dwelling hard upon the borders of penury; while upon a favored few, like Jack, the gods of both worlds had smiled.

But now, upon the arms of this laughing girl, they crowded back to him once more, as they then were, and never would be again, filling the studio with their eager ghosts—long-haired and threadbare boys, dis-

copies of Murger, raw-boned Celts, and lanky Americans. And here upon their shoulders came Judy herself, Judy at dazzling nineteen. For a moment they thronged the room, marching round there through wreathing cigarette smoke, while the piano rocked upon its castors to some popular lilt of the day. And now there was Judy, perched upon the throne, with their eyes towards her, and their lifted glasses—Judy, pretending to be shy, with her lips to the wine. Ten years ago, was it?—ten years; and now? Broggers turned his eyes from the picture, and met those of Jack and Lilah. Lilah had linked her arm with her husband's. She knew something of Judy's story, and now, looking at it through honeymoon spectacles, her eyes half filled with tears.

“Poor Judy!” she said again.

The others came up to them, and Robin held out his hand.

“Going already?” cried Chris.

“I've promised to call for s—some of the Wings,” explained Robin; “they're helping at a mission near here.”

But the name on Robin's lips had caught Jack's attention, and to an evening of small beer lent a touch of coincidence.

“Wings?” he repeated. “Wings of Highbury?”

Robin nodded.

“Do you know them?” he asked.

Jack was looking at him curiously.

“Well,” he said at last, “we're not exactly intimate, you know.”

Outside in the street Robin thought this matter over a little.

“I wonder if he knows Betty,” he said.

Sitting up late over the studio fire, Chris learned something of Judy's girlish history.

"It was her own fault, I suppose," said Jack. "She ought to have known better, of course. But—well, we all have our ideals, I suppose." He knocked the ashes out of his pipe and went across to the picture.

"Poor little Judy!" he said. "It was damned bad luck, though. Lilah's quite right. She'll never be"—he jerked his thumb towards it, returning to his arm-chair—"she'll never be *that* any more."

Chris grunted, blowing rings of smoke against the mantelpiece. "Funny thing," he said presently, "funny thing your knowing the Wings."

Jack laughed.

"Oh, I don't know," he said. "Everybody's life's more or less a series of episodes. And the Wings make up one of mine—a long time back, though, like a dream. Have you met them?"

Chris shook his head.

"I knew them rather well," said Jack. "In younger days, of course. My father was a missionary in India, you know, and a friend of old Wing's; and I was left in his care during my schooldays. I had to spend my holidays with him. I remember those holidays very distinctly—each one of 'em was a sort of separate little purgatory. It was my own fault, of course. I was a perverse little devil—couldn't make allowances, you know. He's one of those people who have an influence upon a certain type of adolescence. He has a partiality for very young men. He's been used of God—it's his own expression—in bringing about what he calls their conversion. He used to keep count of them, I remember—used

to hang 'em up like scalps round his spiritual wigwam.”

He leaned forward and poked the fire.

“It’s all temperament, I suppose—Lord, though, I don’t know—I remember one summer, the first or second that I spent with him, how I ran up against a painter man. It was in a country lane, and he was filling up the background to a picture of a sort of wood-fairy or something like that—just the head and shoulders of a girl poking through some bushes. It was the loveliest thing I’d ever seen, though, in the actual making. I don’t know who the fellow was. My devotion must have amused him, anyway, for he let me hang about for hours watching him paint. Then I went home and tried to draw the idea for myself. I tried about twenty times, and then—well, suddenly it came, you know, as things will sometimes. I fairly crowed with delight. I was about fifteen, I suppose. And then I felt somebody’s hot breath upon my neck, and there was Wing. I remember coloring up, and thinking that he was going to praise me. There was the girl, you see, as like as life, with her white shoulders between the brambles—I thought them very beautiful; but I think he only noticed that they were unclothed. I remember his hand—he has rather large hands—coming over my shoulder and crunching up the paper. But he was very kind. He was always kind, you know. He made me kneel down beside him, while he prayed God to keep my mind purer in the future. I remember that he included a petition in his family prayers for one who was being very especially tempted of the flesh; and everybody wondered, or I thought that they did, what new sort of wickedness I had been caught in.” He laughed a

little. "I haven't seen him since I was about eighteen—you and Lilah would hardly have been out of the nursery then.

"My father died in that year—died abroad; and an aunt, who had lived in Jamaica all her life, became my guardian. I had just been articled to some solicitors; but all my spare time I spent at an Art School, till old Wing found me out. That was just before my aunt came home. And I think he'd had enough of me by then, and was pretty glad to hand me over to somebody else. I went my own way after that."

He looked over at Chris with a graver face.

"And he's gone his," he added, stretching his shoulders, with a yawn. "And he thinks that he's found the Kingdom of Heaven."

Upstairs, with his back to his own fireplace, Chris surveyed his empty parlor. It seemed to him as though for a moment the tapestry of his particular corner of life had been turned a little, so that the strands of its making had become visible, crossing, some of them, far back, then parted again—and now drawn together once more into the fabric of some unknown pattern.

"It's a wum world," he observed; "I'm blowed if it isn't," and then, gazing thoughtfully into his arm-chair, he made yet another discovery.

For there, lying unheeded, was crumpled the tiny square of some gossamer fabric, edged about with lace. He lifted it reverently; and it lay in his hand like thistle-down from the wind. He bent over it; and there rose up to him some innermost perfume of springtime. He kissed it.

CHAPTER VI

WHICH RECORDS A SPIRITUAL DISCOVERY

IF Maturity boggles a little at the subsequent event of this same evening, to Youth, at any rate, walking lightly among superlatives, there could be no more wonderful experience imaginable—an experience at once so strange and radiant that in its light all others, past and to come, must bow dazed knees and admit themselves outshone. Even Reason, the mellow friend of later days, examining the history of this occasion with a dispassionate judgment, must admit itself to be at something of a loss. For premising (as was here the case) a boy with an inherited altruistic tendency, with emotions still barely harnessed to an unripe and innocent judgment, with a disposition no less malleable than is common to his time of life, and withal in the hands of a little group of enthusiasts, unremitting in their attentions, and conscious of previous successes—premissing all this, and concluding that some such event as is to be recorded was well-nigh inevitable; and that this holy miracle was in reality no miracle at all—there yet remains this obstinate truth, that, for all the clarity of the logic, the logician himself remains only half convinced.

At the same time there can be no denying that Robin had already made a considerable progress towards that transformation of character and custom which was so desired by his new friends; and that these same changes had, after all, been more than

probable. For the young Wings, after the first clash of conflicting trainings, had proved themselves sufficiently companionable; and Robin, with his fortune to make, was wise enough, at the outset, to make the best of his surroundings—a compromise that was very satisfactorily justified by these jingling sovereigns in his trouser-pocket.

That the initial stages of such a process should be entirely free from certain annoyances was, of course, hardly to be expected; but these had never been more than trivial, and their effect upon his natural cheerfulness merely transient. Thus, for example, it was a rule in the Wing household that none of its members should smoke; and as a result Robin's brand-new briar lay unused in a bottom drawer. But then he had never really become accustomed to it.

Once, too, he had been to a *matinée* at the theater, and had returned with enthusiastic praises of a certain pretty young actress then rising to fame. But his remarks had fallen upon stony ground; and presently Betty had explained matters to him with her usual gentle tact. Perhaps he did not know how deeply her father felt upon this vexed question of theater-going. Robin had no idea. Did she herself think it wrong, then? Well, to be quite frank (though she would judge nobody else), she thought it incompatible with the highest spiritual life—a vague term to Robin. One must consider the lives of the actresses. Did Betty know any actresses? Well, no, not personally; but then she had sometimes read the newspapers. Had Robin thought of their terrible temptations? N—no, he could not say that he had; and it was jolly decent of Betty to have talked the matter over with him.

On one occasion, again, Chris had asked him to a dance at some rooms in Kensington. But Mr. Wing had deprecated a return to Highbury at the late hour that this would have necessitated; and it had required no great intuition to establish other reasons behind his protest. Robin had very soon forgotten these small occasions, however; and being endowed with an unexacting temperament, had found his life very busy and happy. Always, too, there was this glorious consciousness of being dependent for his living upon his own unaided strivings.

It was Peter who had actually elicited his promise of attendance at this particular gathering to-night; but Ralph's arm in his own, and Betty's smile across the table, had been the clinching factors in the elder son's success. And it was to please these two, rather than to admire the popular evangelist, that he was now making his way to the hall. Already, at the bottom of the street, there had come to him, above the clatter of the lessening traffic, some general sense of neighboring singing, and the lower vibrations of an organ. And now as he drew near to the entrance he could almost distinguish the words of the hymn. Broad rays of light were streaming out from the great windows and spreading themselves over the street, where helpers in the mission were busy distributing invitations. People began to pass him reading these with different expressions, serious, derisive, or merely stolid. Already the roadway was littered with crumpled handbills. One or two persons would seem to be hesitating as to whether or not they should accept the urgent appeal in the dark-blue lettering; and two of these, a young man and a girl, were pausing just in front of him. They were betrothed, he fancied—

walking out together, at any rate; and he wondered what mutual attraction had drawn them to one another.

Beneath the gas-jet that flared above the entrance to the hall they turned round for a minute, perplexed between the welcome within and the proved joys of the pavement outside; and Robin saw both their faces, sallow and pimply, and not, he thought, very pleasant to look upon. The girl was disputing with her companion in a high-pitched, reedy voice. His name, it seemed, was Gus; and he was pulling the waxed ends of a sandy mustache in a temporary dilemma.

"Aw right, Gerty," he was telling her; "give a feller a chanst, won't yer?"

And why did the girl wear such a preposterous hat, Robin wondered, at least twice too big for her insignificant shoulders, and self-condemnatory in second-hand ribbons and draggling feathers? It was neither pleasing nor comfortable, he should have thought. But then what was comfort? For Gerty believed this hat of hers, this dear product of scanty savings and a hard-won leisure, to be so beautifully congruous with her fur stole (such a good imitation of white fox), that mere comfort became a very secondary consideration.

She caught Robin's eyes fixed momentarily upon her, and drew herself up a little. For though all this might be only the ritual of love, and a tribute to Gus, yet it was not unpleasant to be admired by somebody else as well. And, besides, in a somewhat drab and workaday world, it was not too often that one might look thus at one's best, as Gus and the shop windows had assured her that she was looking to-night. Had Robin noticed her new waist-belt, she

wondered, resplendent in glittering buckles, and so dazzling, indeed, that Gus had assured her he felt quite shy of putting his arm in the usual place. She tossed her head a little.

Presently they turned about again, deciding to enter; and there rose up from them certain mingled and contrasted odors, very sweet and pungent, and heightened by a gust of warm air from the hall beyond. This must have held nearly a thousand people, and was already very full; and following Gerty and her lover up the central aisle, Robin became aware that they were typical of a large proportion of the audience. There seemed to him to be more girls present than men, row behind row of them, some frankly shabby, but the majority decked out in the tawdry glories of their evening changes, tightly booted, nodding their plumes, and sparkling with obvious jewelry.

Some of them were sitting with their lovers, young men with shiny hair; while others, in groups of three and four, were taking an obvious respite from arm-in-arm promenades. It would seem, too, as if each one, like Gerty, had sprinkled herself very liberally with perfume; so that as they moved about, and notably when they all sat down together at the end of the hymn, there rose upon the air all manner of scents, unknown to Araby, that presently brooded above the assembly in a warm, impalpable stratum.

Upon the platform there was set a table containing a glass of water and a Bible; and behind this sat the missionary, with some gentlemen in clerical attire, while in a semicircle of rising tiers at the back of the hall there was arranged a voluntary choir of men and women, among whom was Betty. Presently she was going to sing a solo; and Robin fancied that she had

observed his entrance. At any rate, she smiled in his direction.

He found himself sitting beside Gerty and Gus.

"Them flars is all right; what?" whispered Gerty, with her eyes upon the plants that fringed the platform.

"Not 'arf," agreed Gus dubiously, eying the clerical contingent with some distrust. And of these it happened to be Peter who was selected to-night to offer up the opening prayer; and it was characteristic of a certain change in Robin that he found himself criticizing, for a moment, his felicity of phrase and metaphor. But it was a very satisfactory prayer; and the old man across the aisle repeated an enthusiastic "Amen." Robin glanced at him from the corners of his eyes, beholding a ruddy and white-haired artisan, who was gazing upon Peter with devout, approving eyes.

Then, with Betty in the foreground, standing up there, rather pale and slim, and the center of this thousand pairs of eyes, Robin felt for the first time a faint sense of partnership in the proceedings, of anxiety for their ultimate success; as though even some vague portion of himself were upon its trial before the multitude. Would she sing well? he wondered. Or would they laugh at her, perhaps, these loafers and hoydens, with their smart jibes and second-rate songs? How awful it must be, too, to stand alone up there with all these strange people staring at one. Why had they let her do it?

But if Betty were nervous, it was not the least apparent; and if Robin had been nearer he would have observed no faltering in the clear color of her cheeks. She might almost have been singing at home;

and the simple words to the obvious tune found general favor.

"Don't she sing nice?" whispered Gerty; and Robin's heart warmed to her suddenly.

"Nice-lookin' girl, too," commented Gus.

And now the missionary himself came forward, a robust and pleasing figure, with a voice of no great refinement, but of a peculiarly big and human quality, that at the outset seemed to strike answering chords in his hearers' sympathy. He talked to them easily, with a gift of intimacy that was seldom at a loss for words; and almost immediately he began, after his own manner, to conjure up their laughter.

He was wondering why they had come in there, from so fine a night. He could guess, perhaps, what they might otherwise be doing, buying ribbons, eating oysters ("what 'o," said Gus), quarreling, kissing, sitting about in draughty places, catching colds in their heads.

Gus laughed reminiscently.

It was generally the men, he fancied, who caught the colds. The girls had better opportunities of keeping warm, of being kept warm, perhaps he should say.

The audience giggled.

Some of them again might possibly have been pushing perambulators. He believed that nowadays it was the men who pushed the perambulators.

Gerty gurgled with delight, and crept blushfully a little nearer to Gus.

Ah, those perambulators! Let them wait, some of them, till they should grow weary of pushing one of them, till one, indeed, should cease perhaps to be sufficient. Some of them knew what that meant. Ay,

they did. There was his own mother, for instance—a deeper note began to creep into his voice—let him draw a picture for them of the little Scotch home at the pit's mouth; of the young family, so hardly fed; of the mother's cheeks, so pale, and of her hands, so bony and scarred; of the husband, whom the pit swallowed up. Could they imagine that night? It was just an ordinary June evening, with the moon lifting itself gravely above the hilltops, climbing up among the stars, shining down over the lanes and byres, silencing the dusty hedges, spreading its calm light, like an angel's wing, over this little Fifeshire village. They must think of the shifts changing; the tired men coming home to supper; the awakening men going out to labor; the families parted for a little; the families united for a little; the gradual dwindling of lights from the upper windows; the quiet passing of the hours—and then this sudden tremor in the earth's bowels; the bubbling up of these vast, unleashed forces, like thunder heard in dreams; terror's grip at the heart; the sudden trampling of frightened feet; lights flickering, voices of horror, calling through the dark; eternity crammed into minutes; inexorable death. . . .

And after that there would come, well, just life again, to be lived on as before, a little bit darker, a little bit harder, with fewer hours of sleep, perhaps, and more of work. In addition, too, there would come a tiny new life, to be brought forth, to be cherished, and cried over, and comforted. Would they be surprised then if this poor mother's cheeks grew a little paler, if the shadows deepened about her eyes? . . .

Robin leaned back a little in his chair, and caught

a glimpse of Gerty's face, lips parted, with a big tear rolling down her cheeks. The preacher continued—

Labor must have its toll, he told them, and now, if they would bear with him, he would tell them a little about the history of the barefooted errand boy who had become their pastor of to-night. He must tell them of hunger and thirst, of belts tightened up, of clothes patched and repatched, turned and turned again. Surely they must weep with him over the sad downfall of the frock-coat given to his father, that fell, by doleful degrees, to its last estate, as the knickerbockers of Billy, the youngest. He must lead them through the slow progression of this hard-trying little family. They would stand for a minute, perhaps, at his mother's bedside. There were no drums at her funeral; but, instead, there gathered about her coffin seven boys, of whom there was not one but had set his foot upon the rung of an upward ladder. . . .

His words thrilled them.

She was asleep up there in Fife, and the peewits called about her grave; and she was tired when at last her call came, and not sorry to fold her hands. But had she regretted one moment of all her life? Not one; and why? Ah, they must have guessed by now. . . .

He paused for a minute, with his eyes upon all their dim-lit faces.

Would they have her secret, then, and not hers alone, but the secret of all glorified, toiling lives? . . .

They hung upon his words.

Then he would tell them; for though she had labored and been heavy-laden, she had found rest, where alone rest may be found. A Friend had walked beside her, had never left her, had whispered hope, hope,

hope, to all her sorrows. And that was very nearly all that he had time to say; but when his lips began to name this great Companion, this dear Jesus, he found it hard to hold his words in check. Would this great company bear with him a moment? They had gathered, he supposed, from all quarters of this giant metropolis, from factories, and counters, and offices, from one-rooms and two-rooms, from garrets and mansions, from their hundred separate cells of this vast human hive. They had come—they would never all meet again—and he could not let them go till he had talked to them about his Friend. They had been toiling, some of them, since the early hours; they would return, some of them, to toil again perhaps until the dawn should break once more. Would they remember, therefore, how this Son of Man was also Himself a toiler, born of toilers, the Peasant Pilgrim, who had gathered up toil into the very heart of God? Would they remember how poor He was, how He was pillowed upon stones, how He had starved in deserts?

Let them imagine the slow, unwritten years of His earlier life, shadowed, as theirs might never be, with the burdens of all wrestling humanity, past and to come, obsessed with the unthinkable sum of all its sufferings, with the sins of all dynasties dead, of all dynasties yet to be. Let them tread then, for a moment, in the brief historic steps of this God come down to earth. Let them see Him in the cottage at Bethany; let them see Him at the wayside, in the wilderness, in the house of sinners. Let them consider this patient, flawless life—this probation, as it were, that was to make the child of Nazareth the Captain of the world's Salvation. Let them see Him spat upon, and

mocked; let them see Him crowned, and disowned. Let them watch Him at last, under skies ashamed, poised there between earth and heaven.

With practised hands he was playing upon their very heart-strings now—their childish, throbbing heart-strings; and yet they were not his hands, he would have told them. . . .

All this for you.

For you? Why, then for me.

His life for your life.

For your life? Why, then for my life.

The words began to drum in Robin's ears, as already to his eyes there had risen up the very semblance of his martyred Saviour. For his life? And what about his life? And why had he never thought about all this till now? He shut his eyes, with the words still beating at his consciousness, as one in haste might beat upon a door. He seemed to be standing now at some forgotten window of his heart—to be pausing there, with his fingers upon the blind. Why had he never looked out of it before? Ah, but now he must, because of the knocking in the street.

There began to grow in him a sense of sin, and yet less of sin than of some blank and astounding ingratitude. And yet, of course, that must itself be sin. But was it possible then that this Son of God had borne this, died thus, for him—for Robin Rivers? And had he, for nearly nineteen years, been trampling upon these yielded glories, upon this priceless blood? Had he even, with careless hands, struck nails into this sinless flesh? The thought appalled him, the image, black upon his horizon, of his oblivious life, set over against that awful and holy sacrifice; the image of it, growing and darkening, dominating the

world as though there were but two lives strung out through time, these pitiful past years of his own, with their eating, and sleeping, and easy enjoyment; and the majestic and selfless procession of this Christ of Calvary.

This was the lifting of the blind; and behold, now, the very eyes of Jesus, patient, reproachful, and infinitely compassionate. . . .

The words of the preacher began to come to him again.

He was not speaking to them, he said, of the judgment to come, of the second death, and the outer darkness. He would leave with them rather but one impression—the vision of this perfect—*possible*—friendship that might rise up between themselves and God; rise up, because once, for a tiny moment, God had become crystallized into man; this wonderful friendship that would fold its strong arms about them, that would lift them up from all their fretful strivings. Would they come then? . . .

God, and Robin Rivers? Nay, God in Robin Rivers; and this the only penitence, that will gladden those yearning eyes, a penitence in itself a boon so amazing that his little brain must reel to think of it. Would he come? Nay, might he?

And now suddenly there stormed in upon him, full tide, the consciousness that henceforward all life would have but one meaning and one end. There came back to him faint memories of words babbled upon a hilltop, dreams of a little money and a little fame; and all the while there had been *this* awaiting him. He had put out his fingers, craving that he might touch a few sovereigns and straddle across an acre or two of mold; and all the while these un-

searchable riches had been heaped up from earth to heaven. It was as though he had been groveling for pebbles upon the very threshold of the kingdom of God.

Here and there in the body of the hall there were rising now, one by one, men and women, lads mostly and young girls, bearing witness to a new birth. And as they rose the preacher blessed them, "God bless you, sir." "God bless you," "and you," "and you."

Presently Robin himself stood up, half shy, with dazzled, solemn eyes. The big voice greeted him heartily, "God bless you, my boy"; and the old man across the aisle repeated the benediction with apple-cheeked enthusiasm. At his side, too, were Gerty and Gus, standing up, arm in arm, with awed faces towards the platform. There must have been fifty of them standing up there in the gas-lit hall, wrapped about with the heavy, scented air (Maturity lays a certain emphasis upon the hot air), crowned there with everlasting life, and with a new name written upon their foreheads.

"Will you remain standing for a minute?" asked the preacher; and now the whole gathering bent down about them, like reeds before the wind, praying for them, and praising God.

There would come no other moment in life quite like this, quite so transcendent and complete. For now the past, like a child's toy, stained and misused, had been put away and forgiven; and the future shone tranquil over a conquered world.

Music rose up from the organ; and the whole company began to sing together in the words of some simple and ardent hymn.

"I've found a Friend ; O such a Friend !
He loved me ere I knew Him ;
He drew me with the cords of love,
And thus He bound me to Him."

Yes, it was true. It was extraordinary. He, Robin Rivers, had joined hands with Christ, had become linked with God, who had made the worlds. What did it mean? Ah, that he could not tell—all his life, temporal and eternal, would now become the slow unfolding of this very mystery. But this, at any rate, he knew, that he was safe—safe in the arms of Jesus. In his hand was the key of all problems to come. In his heart dwelt all strength, all love, all mercy. There were no longer any fears of ultimate defeat. It would never matter now if he were rich or poor, remembered or forgotten. He had been snatched up from the infinitely trivial. His feet had been set upon the Rock ; and God was with him.

"I've found a Friend ; O such a Friend !
So wise, and true, and tender !"

People were shaking hands with him now, people whom he had never seen before. He had joined some great brotherhood. He was shaking hands with Gus and Gerty. They were all standing together upon some spiritual mountain crest ; and Betty came down to him like a star.

The bus rattled genially homewards up the commonplace streets.

"And it seems to me," said Robin, overflowing with the wonder of his discovery, "it seems to me as if I had wasted nineteen whole years ; as if I had never done, or said, or thought anything that ever mattered at all."

Betty nodded with understanding.

"That's just how one feels," she agreed.

Robin looked at her enviously.

"But not you," he said. "You've never felt like that, have you?"

Betty laughed.

"Why, of course," she said. "I feel like that nearly every day."

"But," said Robin, "you—you've done lots of things. You're helping people all the time."

Betty's gesture embraced the metropolis.

"What's that?" she asked him. "When there's all this—and the world beyond?"

"It's something, anyway," said Robin, "and I—I've done nothing."

"Poor Robin," she smiled; and it was the first time that she had called him by his Christian name, although neither of them noticed it.

They rolled leisurely up the Pentonville Road, and at the summit waited for a minute or two by the Angel, the center of four confluent streams of traffic. In front of them stretched Upper Street, Islington, still garish with blazing shop-windows and torch-lit coster's barrows.

Presently they plied on, climbing still, towards the quieter streets of Highbury. The air had grown chilly, and they were riding on the top of the omnibus. Robin pulled the mackintosh covering more closely about their knees; and for a little while they were silent, while the London that surrounded them began to gather a new shape and meaning to his understanding. For now it was less the vague whirlpool of half-known forces than some definite channel of existence, through which souls were pouring into eternity—

scarred souls, for the most part, he feared, shriveled up with sin, and untouched by Christ.

He surveyed the mingling streams of men and women with a new and very big compassion. With his hand in his Saviour's, he too must become a saviour.

"You must come down sometimes," said Betty. "You must come down to Hoxton and help us."

How wonderful that she should have guessed his thoughts!

"Oh, may I?" he asked, and began to besiege her with questions. There was so much to be learned, so infinitely much to be accomplished. If only he might have had Betty for an elder sister during these past wasted years, how differently he would have lived them, how equipped by now he might have been for the gathering of this great harvest.

"How rum it is that I should never have bothered about people at all before—what they thought, and whether or not they were—they were——"

"Salvation," smiled Betty, "Salvation and Service always go together, you know."

Young Oxford, clambering back from a front seat, overheard her with an inward comment.

"God deliver us from prigs," he said piously.

Under a lamp-post in Riviera Street, Hammer-smith, Gerty and Gus were standing very close together. They had made some mutual confessions; and their souls stood bare to one another.

"An' that was the last time I done anythink like it," said Gus; "an' now never again, old girl, never again, so 'elp me Gawd!"

He held her from him, looking down into her eyes. She put up her lips to be kissed.

"An' yer—yer don't love me any less for tellin' yer?" he asked her.

She put her arms round his neck, regardless of passers-by.

"Oh, more," she whispered. "'Eaps an' 'eaps more."

Peter made a brief note in his diary. If he had not been the direct means of converting Robin, he had, at any rate, been of some assistance in the process. And in future he would pray for him every Tuesday morning.

CHAPTER VII

WHICH CONTAINS AN INTERLUDE OF SENTIMENT

BUT while the larger world may have drawn away certain of our pilgrims, setting before them its prizes and problems, and gathering them, whether they would or not, into the perplexed stream of its humanity, Blend at any rate remained as yet unruffled by their experiences; and concerned itself placidly with the passing of the seasons.

Whitsuntide fell rather late this year, crowning a tropical fortnight, so that it was the bluest of six-o'clock skies that greeted Margaret as she rolled over in bed and opened sleepy eyelids towards her window. And with the breeze that blew in to her there entered this morning quite an unusual number of stirring and pleasant recollections; of Chris, who was already at Whinchurch with Broggers; of Robin, who was coming home to-day for his first visit since he had begun life in London; and of the Castletons, who had taken a house-boat this summer, and moored it already beneath the westernmost fringe of Deerlock Wood. It was the sudden recollection of this that sent her jumping out of bed in the hasty resolve to pay Lilah an early visit and persuade her, if possible, to come for a swim.

Pulling on her stockings and shoes, she wrapped an old mackintosh round her dressing-gown and ran downstairs, pushing back the bolts of a side-door and coming

out upon the lawn. For a moment the beauty of the hour and the scene held her standing there with parted lips, the whole of the little valley, decked and fragrant, stretched out before her eyes. The sun was still low, but south of the stream the level series of water-meadows lay revealed in a clear and liquid detail—a golden contrast to the woods beyond the river, where, as yet, a few clustered larches only had caught the sunlight, thrust upwards, like shining spears, through a mist of purple shadows. The hill, too, where she had climbed with Robin, bending away a little to the north, still rested in a kind of bright twilight, veiled about with a delicate dusty radiance that might almost have been some manifest exhalation of its surrounding tree-tops.

Bareheaded, with her towel round her neck, she ran down across the fields to the reedy brim of the river, turning along the towpath towards her father's boat-house.

This would be her first swim of the year, and, smiling to herself, she remembered how, when she was still a little girl, changing her clothes here in the cool darkness, it had seemed to her that the green water, lifting itself up to knock against the door, and receding again to gurgle about the stakeposts, had spoken to her in audible words: "Come along, Mar—garet; come along, Mar—garet." And now to-day as she slipped into her bathing-jersey the old appeal came up to her once more: "Come along, Mar—garet."

She opened the boat-house door, standing for a moment in the entrance, the air blowing over her limbs and creeping like some magical tonic down into her lungs. An early butterfly, brushing against her shoulder, twinkled by her into the shadows behind; and at her feet the willow-branches on each side of the narrow

entrance were nodding up and down, beating the surface into tiny ripples. Life was being very good to her this morning, she thought, and with a little gasp of laughter slid down into the water and waded out along the graveled bottom.

At the mouth of the backwater she struck away across the broad current of the stream, at first through a twinkling stratum of sunlight, and thence into the shadowy mirror beneath the opposite bank. Here, between the willow-trunks, the grass was starred with celandine and embroidered with green clumps of broad-leaved cumfrey; and among the gnarled roots of these old trees she could see the little wrens hunting busily for grubs. The water too, after the first shock, had become surprisingly warm. "Because I'm so fat, perhaps," she thought.

Years ago, during holiday bathes with the boys, they had jeered at her for her plumpness; and diving below the surface with a lean superiority, had pinched her legs, coming up again to call her "fatty." "I suppose I was rather podgy," she reflected, and pulled herself up on to the deck of the house-boat. Jack was away in town, and she knocked at Lilah's window. But Lilah was already up and dressed.

"My dear girl," she cried, "isn't the water most frightfully cold?"

"It's ripping!" said Margaret. "Simply ripping! Aren't you coming in?"

But Lilah shook her head.

"I'm—too lazy," she said.

Margaret pulled her feet up from the water, squatting boyishly upon her haunches, with her arms round her knees.

"You horrid little slacker!" she said.

"I know," said Lilah dolefully.

"And you've no idea how warm the water is; and how jolly and dancy it makes one feel inside; and, besides, it's so lonely swimming about all by oneself." Lilah steeled herself against temptation.

"I'm very sorry," she said.

Margaret uncurled herself, and stood up, prepared to dive in again.

"I'm rather disappointed in you," she complained.

"You see," began Lilah, "I—I don't believe I ought to."

Margaret opened her brown eyes.

"Why ever not?" she asked. "You're not feeling bad, are you?"

"Rather not!" said Lilah, with rosy cheeks.

The valley had swung round a little now; so that before them the whole hillside lay smitten into glory. And as they stood there in a moment's silence, there rose upon their ears a sudden wave of sound, as though each fluttering leaf in all the wood, turning itself sunwards, were sucking up with eager lips its first sweet draughts of light—a sound at once joyous and solemn, as of a great company drinking some glad and holy health.

Lilah looked into Margaret's eyes and laughed a little.

"You're rather a kid still, you know," she said.

And this was the moment that must remain the only justification of a somewhat trivial chapter—of so slender a fabric may the crises of a pilgrimage be built. An unspoken word or two, the light reflected back from the eyes of a comrade who yesterday was at one's side but to-day has climbed a little and caught

the wider vision, a hand reached down and grasped; and, behold the old landscape swallowed up for ever, as the new one sweeps out to the horizon.

Thus, a minute later, an amazed servant, emerging upon the opposite end of the deck, beheld her mistress in the close embrace of a very wet young woman with bare arms.

"Oh, Lilah!" she was saying, "how stupid I am; and how—how lovely for you."

"Perhaps," said Mrs. Castleton, "when you have finished *ruining* my frock you'll run home and come back and have breakfast with me."

"Yes," said Lilah, preparing to set her pretty teeth into a third piece of bread and butter; "it's simply wonderful, isn't it? Here was I, two years ago, as much a kid as you are, and now——"

They were breakfasting in the little cabin, and she gazed thoughtfully through the window.

"You would never have thought it possible, would you?"

Margaret shook her head over the unique phenomenon that was to befall this fortunate young wife.

"It's a funny thing," pursued Lilah, "but when Jack first asked me to marry him I had all sorts of regrets at leaving the stage. It seemed to me that acting was the only thing worth living for—making people laugh and cry, holding them breathless, you know, and all that sort of thing."

She cut herself another piece of bread.

"But this——"

She found herself at a loss for words.

"Knocks spots out of it," suggested Margaret tactfully, reaching for the marmalade.

"It's like the sunshine to the footlights," said Lilah. "That was all make-believe, but this is the real thing—the real thing."

"I think you're a jolly lucky girl," mumbled Margaret.

Lilah leaned across the table, looking at her with serious eyes.

"I believe I'm the luckiest girl God ever made," she said.

An hour later Margaret found herself walking meditatively through the woods towards the station. This had always been her favorite path, and she was convinced that there could not be a lovelier in England. She could imagine, at any rate, no other woods that would ever displace these from her heart. Here she had come ever since she had been big enough to paddle herself over the river; here she had come to play, alone, or with the boys; here she had found birds' eggs, and hunted for orchids, and climbed trees, and torn her stockings; here she had been bullied, and pelted with dead leaves, and rolled down the steeper portions of the hillside; here she had listened to boastful recitals of personal triumphs at school; here she had sometimes guessed secrets.

But there had never been a secret like this before. Those others—the little discoveries, reaching back to her earliest childhood—had none of them been more tremendous than another step along a quiet road, or more poignant than some tiny growing-pain in a limb becoming stronger. They had been the commas in her simple history. But this was different. This was a full stop. "You have begun a new chapter," it said. And yet for a long time she had known that, of course,

this must be so, known it half-consciously, as perhaps these woods, wrapped in their early shadows, had known that day was in the valley. So, also, she had witnessed the change in the lives of her contemporaries, the emerging from a callower girlhood of certain school friends and neighbors. But never till now, as the sun had struck away the mists from Deerlock, had her own little share in the progress been written thus clearly upon her consciousness.

It was as though this secret in Lilah's eyes had been the portal of her own enlightenment; as though, by the reading of it, she had entered into womanhood—altogether, a very astonishing, breathless experience, a little solemn too, perhaps, but with inspiring vistas.

"The apotheosis of Spring," protested an injured voice, "and she passes me by without so much as a glance."

Broggers regarded her ruefully. He was sitting upon a fallen log, with a battered straw hat pushed back above his forehead.

"The apotheosis of Spring," he continued; "a maiden, at the end of her teens, striding along like a boy—you do take very long steps, you know—swinging a hat in her right hand, and meditating, if one may hazard a guess, upon something rather pleasant."

"I'm sorry," said Margaret, "but I never saw you. I didn't, on my honor."

She drew a brown finger across her throat.

"Never saw me," sighed Broggers. "Never saw me; and here have I been watching you for at least two and a half minutes. And you've given me a happy idea, too."

He pulled out a pencil.

"Is it a sonnet?" asked Margaret, "or a sketch? I can't wait, you know, or I shall miss the train."

"Are you going to meet somebody, then?" inquired Broggers.

"Only Robin," she said.

Only Robin?

And then, because no great discovery can be altogether barren of disciples, there came to her another one. She had passed now beyond the sweep of trees and was down at the river's edge where the stream bent round towards Whinchurch and Wrayley. Looking back for a minute, she could see her home, in the middle distance, curled sleepily among its elms; and beyond it the blue downs dying away into the flat country towards Oxford. She leaned with her back against the keeper's gate. It was not the world, or even this little bit of it, that was different.

Somewhere in the borders of the wood a blackbird was singing; and presently, with accustomed eyes, she could see him perched upon the lowest slender bough of a sapling. Every now and then he would move a little; and the whole branch was bending beneath his weight. He might almost have been telling his beads to God upon a rosary of buds.

"And, oh, blackbird!" she said to him, "I'm in love. I'm in love. I'm in love."

Chris lounged into his uncle's breakfast-room from an early inspection of the young pheasants, and found Broggers hard at work.

Presently he looked up, and crumpling his manuscript into a ball, threw it to his nephew.

"My tribute to a morning vision," he said, as Chris unfolded it.

The Pilgrims' March

- " May's our little débutante,
May has lilac in her hair,
Heart of laughter in her eyes,
Brimming over there,
Light of foot she trips her way,
Light of foot, to find her king,
Surely he will stoop to-day
For her welcoming.
- " Little April running free,
Here are ponds and pearls of dew,
Bend your pretty eyes and see—
See what has become of you.
- " Flying tresses neatly coiled,
Bend your pretty eyes and see,
Satin shoes to keep unsoiled,
What a lot of finery!
- " Gaze into the mirror, where
Shines your rosy face, and own
Brother March, though comrade rare,
Might not hold you from your throne,
Might not hold—nay, what is this?
Stoops a prince, with ardent eyes,
Bends above your waking soul,
Takes it by surprise. . . ."

It was at this point that Chris interrupted himself for a moment.

"I saw her, too," he said.

"Eh?" said Broggers, looking up at him quickly.
"Saw whom?"

Chris reddened a little, but regarded his uncle with composure.

"The girl who inspired you," he said. "But I—I shouldn't have thought you would have called her pretty, exactly."

There was a tentative inquiry in his tone.

"I didn't," snapped Broggers; "I said that she'd got pretty eyes."

"Do you think she has?"

Broggers laid down his egg-spoon and gazed solemnly at his nephew.

"My dear Chris," he said, "every girl who is young and healthy, and lives in the open air, and has a sweet soul, is bound to have pretty eyes."

He sipped his coffee.

"Of course," he added, "she should also be in the habit of making a good breakfast."

But when Chris had lounged from the room again he leaned back in his chair and chuckled.

"Now I wonder," he observed to Barker, "I wonder if you have ever fallen in love?"

"Fallen where, sir?" asked Barker.

"Fallen in love," repeated Broggers.

A faint smile crept about Barker's features. He coughed reminiscently, but with discretion.

"'Ardly so pernounced as a fall, sir," he said; "but I've 'ad tendencies."

Upon the platform of Wrayley Station Margaret was greeted by a tall young man who was looking healthy but depressed. A good many years ago, when he had played cricket for Berkshire, he had been the common idol of herself and the boys.

"Hullo, Topsy!" he said.

This was always the sad hour of Bob Herrick's year, when it became his annual and painful duty to welcome back to his studio at Wrayley sundry bronzes and plasters that had failed to wring admission from the guardians of the Royal Academy.

"Yes," he told her; "they've all come back again—like the cat in the song, you know."

"And hasn't Lady Herrick kept any of them?" sympathized Margaret.

Bob shook his head gloomily. His mother's house in Cornwall Gardens was already stacked to repletion with the labors of his hand.

"No room," he said; but presently his brow cleared a little. He must have been nearer forty than thirty; but nature and a country life had preserved for him the artless countenance of his boyhood.

"I'm just finishing a top-hole Circe, though," he told her. "You must toddle round and see her. Best thing I've ever done."

The train steamed slowly into the station and Robin beheld upon the platform a quite ordinary little girl. She was wearing a dust-colored overcoat, and a red tam-o'-shanter; and possessed no other distinction than that of familiarity. He was rather pallid and the cerements of Highbury still clung about his thoughts.

"Jolly lucky that I could get off," he said, with a certain trace of self-consciousness. "For I was supposed to be addressing a meeting to-night over in Islington."

CHAPTER VIII

WHICH DISPLAYS A PROPHET AMONG HIS PEOPLE

A CONSIDERABLE experience in dealing with the spiritual development of young men had convinced Mr. Wing that there was nothing so effectual for the clinching of raw convictions as their public exposition. This was the line upon which he himself had been trained; and it was a method that had proved admirably successful in the case of his children. Since their earliest days he had encouraged them in the free expression of their religious sentiments; and for some years past they had all been engaged in active evangelical propaganda.

It was therefore without hesitation that he applied this same principle to Robin, but with a tact that enabled him, in his own words, to let the boy in gently; and to this end a rather nervous Robin had found himself thrust, a day or two after the meeting in Bayswater, into the position of conducting family worship. At first he had demurred a little; but the firm hand of his host, and the kindly encouragement in his eye, had accepted no denial. If it were not Robin's game, as he suggested, why then it should be. For Mr. Wing drew very little distinction between traditional reticence and moral cowardice; and a religion that could not be clothed in words was scarcely to be considered as a religion at all.

So Robin had stumbled through the ceremony as

best he might (and better than he had expected); and for further confirmation had been handed over to the younger members of the family. Thus, by the end of the week, Betty had fulfilled her promise, and Robin had accompanied her to Hoxton, overflowing with the desire to play his part in the good work, but hardly prepared for the rôle assigned to him.

"You must say a few words to these people," Betty said to him. "You've no idea how much they like listening to somebody fresh."

"But I—I haven't anything to tell them," stammered Robin.

She fixed him then with her bright eyes.

"Oh, but you have," she said gravely; and in the end Robin had complied, finding, after all, that this second effort among strangers had been easier than his first in the little circle at Highbury. Moreover, he had discovered in himself, too, a certain unsuspected power of speech, a gift for putting a picture into words that had seemed to hold and interest his listeners; and after that his way had become so easy that by the end of three weeks he had spoken to as many as four different gatherings, with a growing success.

It was to the remembrance of these, to the mental visions of himself telling forth the great gospel of Redemption, that Robin found himself turning for encouragement during his journey down from Paddington. Surely these little sermons of his had been far harder in the delivery than any confession of faith that might still be before him; and yet he felt convinced that this was not the case and that the avowal to be made at home would be, in reality, by far the most difficult task that his new discipleship had al-

lotted to him. Nor did the recollection of his last night's talk with Betty do more than emphasize its importance. For Betty, constructing, from such details as Robin had confided to her, an intuitive picture of the easy and rather worldly sphere in which he had hitherto lived, had laid considerable stress on the necessity for an immediate and very definite statement of his change of heart.

"It will be hard, I know," she said; "because home is always the hardest place to shine in. But in the end it will make your position there far more satisfactory."

They had discussed the matter rather fully; and Betty had promised to be with him, in spirit, throughout this critical occasion. Nevertheless, as the train rolled at last into Wrayley Station, the ordeal before him loomed like some thunder-charged cloud above the bright days of his holiday; and lent Margaret a rather preoccupied cavalier for her homeward journey.

They turned down the towpath together, with an acre or two of budding osiers upon their left, and the river, with the keeper's cottage upon its opposite bank, on their right. The keeper himself was leaning with leisurely elbows upon the gate, where less than an hour ago Margaret herself had been resting for a moment. They had exhausted commonplaces by now, and simultaneously had become aware of an impalpable and rather unreasonable barrier between them, through which, on the one side, Robin's discovery was plucking up a tardy courage to announce itself, and behind which, on the other, Margaret's was sheltering in a decent obscurity.

"She won't understand," despaired Robin.

"He mustn't guess," said Margaret.

"Yes," pursued Robin presently; "it was jolly lucky that I could get off to-day. I'd promised to talk to some men in Islington."

"Where's Islington?" asked Margaret.

"Oh, a place in the north of London," said Robin.

There was a minute or two of silence.

"You see I'd promised," continued Robin.

"I see," said Margaret. "Did you get somebody to do it for you, then?"

Robin nodded.

"One of the Wings," he said, "Ralph—he's a very good sort; speaks jolly well, too."

"Do you still like being with the Wings?" inquired Margaret.

"Rather! They—they've taught me a lot, you know."

Robin was feeling more uncomfortable than he had felt since his first meal at Highbury. It was almost, indeed, as if that little fragment of history were being repeated, with himself as the inquisitor.

"They've made me think about things," he said desperately. But Margaret showed no signs of seconding his efforts.

"About—about God and—and sin, and that," he continued.

Their eyes were averted from one another; and across the stream they could hear Broggers' keeper whistling to his dogs.

"Have you ever thought of them?" asked Robin. Margaret was rather red, and kept her eyes fixed firmly upon the river-bank at her right.

"N—sometimes," she muttered.

"It's made an awful lot of difference to me," said

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Robin. "It's made me another chap. D'you—d'you know what it means to be *saved*, Margaret?"

Margaret was silent.

"It—it makes an awful lot of difference to one's life," pursued Robin, "to—to feel one's sins are all forgiven and—and that."

Oh, blind Robin—couldn't he see that she would sooner strip her body bare to him than reveal to any one at all these secrets of her soul? Couldn't he see that she would sooner tell him, unasked, how her heart had just bowed itself before his feet, than let his fingers pluck the veil from this other deeper sanctuary? Presently—a long time from now—she might be able to tell him the answers to these stuttering questions; but never before he had learned them for himself. So why not spare them both all this unnecessary and horrible discomfort?

"Coo-ee," called a cheerful voice; and looking up they saw in front of them two figures waiting under the next hedgerow—the figure of Esther, with Lilah on her arm. Lilah was waving her handkerchief; and at the sight of it the dumb spirit in Margaret became suddenly exorcized.

"Look!" she said, "there's your mother and Lilah Castleton. The Castletons have got their house-boat down here, you know, and this morning we went for a swim; at least, I went by myself. And the water was quite warm. It was really."

"My dear old Robin!"

Esther kissed him.

"But how pale you are!" she said.

"He doesn't look very fit, does he?" said Margaret, scanning his face for the first time, from a dispassionate standpoint between Lilah and Mrs. Rivers.

"Wait till he's had a week at Blend," said Lilah, opening her lungs to the wind. "*Isn't* it all lovely?"

Esther put her arm into her son's, and presently they fell back a pace or two behind the others. Looking at him with little sidelong glances, she saw at once that the hints dropped in his brief letters to her had been the forerunners of some secret that he was going to tell her. She drew his arm a little closer to her side.

"You've been very busy, haven't you, Robin?" she asked.

"Rather!" he said.

"And going about in the evening too," she continued. "*Isn't* that rather too tiring for you after a long day's work?"

Robin began to realize how very much easier, after all, it is to talk to one's mother than to most people—even than to a kid like Margaret.

He described to her the great event that had befallen him, and even sketched for her, in a little while, the line of argument that had convinced his heart.

By the time they had crossed the last meadow, eloquence was coming to him very easily; and when they turned presently into the lane that led up to the village, his mother kissed him a second time. She had not said very much; but then the dialogue had not given her many opportunities.

Thinking this conversation over, later in the day, Esther found herself rather puzzled both by the change in her son's bearing and her own reception of it. Never since he was a small child had he bestowed upon her quite such an intimate revelation of himself; and yet, while his obvious earnestness must be a matter for rejoicing, his fluent handling of an evidently borrowed

theology jarred upon her a little. It was so unlike the Robin of the past twenty years; and in spite of his confidence, it seemed to leave her a little farther from him than before. This might, of course, be her own fault, in that she herself had never managed to awaken these dormant chords in him. But then she must be glad that they were vibrating now.

"Because, I suppose, all mothers want their boys to grow up into good men," she told Lomax, who had come in for some tea.

"It's pleasant to think so, anyway," he said.

"And yet"—she spread out her hands a little—"one would have liked——"

"To have touched the strings oneself," nodded Lomax.

She smiled.

"I think he feels it a little, too," she went on. "I think he feels that he has climbed beyond his mother."

"He's been preaching to you, eh?" asked Lomax. Esther colored a little.

"I think he has," she admitted.

Robin swung a leg over the window-sill and came into the room. The unburdening of his convictions had not been so very difficult, after all, and his conscience felt the lighter for it.

But the way of a prophet among his people is at the best a thorny one; and at the same moment there came a sound of wheels upon the road outside. Robin looked out over his shoulder,

"It's old Broggers," he said, "with Chris, and Margaret, and Lilah, and another girl. I expect they've come for tea."

And a minute later they were all trooping into the room together; while from the conversational medley

that followed their entrance there emerged the fact that they had been rehearsing tableaux for the village concert. Lilah and the other girl, by reason of a first-hand knowledge of the stage, were responsible for this particular feature of the approaching entertainment.

"And how we shall ever get a curtain to work in that *wretched* little schoolroom, I can't think," said Lilah.

"And it's all to be Shakespearian," said the other girl; "and Margaret's going to be Viola and Ophelia and the first witch; and Lilah's to be stage-manager and Lady Macbeth; and Chris is the Duke and Hamlet and a servant, and if there's time we're going to have Broggers for Falstaff, and——"

"And, as a consequence, my dear Esther," said Broggers, wiping a pink brow, and subsiding into an easy-chair, "as a consequence we have been wallowing in a perfect inferno of curtains, chifions, brown-paper bags, and balls of string. And we're thirstier than the Sahara."

"Oh," said Lilah, "and Bob Herrick says he can't come; says he's mixed up the days—isn't it like him?—and he's got to go to London; and it's a jolly shabby trick to leave us at the last moment; and he says he's *frightfully* sorry, but he really can't come; and so we're going to make Robin come instead,"—words, as it happened, that coincided with a pause in the general clatter—an entirely insignificant pause to anybody but Robin.

But to Robin it seemed now that for the first time, in any real sense, his trial had come upon him—come, too, with no seeking of his own, and between one trivial moment and the next. Would he play

substitute in a tableau? It was absurd how small a matter might tap the great undercurrent of conflicting ideals. It was curious, too, though he had not time to think about it, to remember how, less than six months ago, he would have gone the way of easy acquiescence, without so much as a suspicion that there was any other. And now that he must refuse—(had he not discussed this very matter with Betty?)—there came upon him a desperate and cowardly desire to conceal his real reason. Well—God stand by him.

"I'm sorry," he said; "but I'm afraid I can't."

Chris was talking to the other girl, at the back of the room, but now he looked up.

"Oh, wot!" he said; "of course you can. You must. We can't get along without you."

"I'm sorry," said Robin again, with hot cheeks.

"But why not?" asked Chris. "It'll be an awful wag. It will weally—won't it?"

"Rather!" said the other girl.

"I think," said Esther, "that Robin wants to stay at home and keep me company."

"But you're coming too," they said.

Robin was standing by the tea-table.

"No, it's not that," he stammered. "I—I don't think that such things have a—a good influence."

His mother's face, and Margaret's, were turned away from him, and Lomax was standing behind him, in the shadow of the curtains. But in the eyes of the others, turned upon him suddenly, there was written a blank amazement. He would have preferred bayonets.

"I—I think I ought to tell you," he went on. "I haven't thought much about these things before. But now it seems to me that anything—that anything

which might cause a love for the Stage [Lilah turned a little pink], and perhaps lead people away from God, is—is better left alone. Of course I—I don't want to judge for anybody else."

It was Lilah who broke an uncomfortable silence.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "Of course I quite understand. It doesn't matter a bit. We can easily find somebody else."

"But, oh, my dear!" said the other girl, as they climbed presently into Broggers' wagonette, "what a perfectly awful young man."

"It *was* rather funny, wasn't it?" said Lilah.

"I think it was a jolly fine thing to do," said Margaret hotly. "It's more than any of us would have dared to do, anyway."

She grew hotter than ever a moment later, when Lilah, stooping impulsively to say good-by, held her hand for a minute.

"I'm so sorry, old girl," she said; "I forgot he was such a pal of yours."

Upon the evening after the concert Broggers sat in the rectory study, commenting rather freely upon Robin's absence.

"Good God, Arthur!" he said, "the boy's a prig."

But Lomax, listening to Robin's little harangue, had happened to observe his hand as it rested upon the table; had seen it shaking there behind a barricade of teacups. He shook his head.

"Hardly a prig, I think," he said.

"Well, next door to it, anyway," said Broggers.

"But that might mean anything," smiled Lomax. "A saint, for instance—it's a democratic age, you know."

Broggers, however, feeling rather strongly on this subject, insisted upon having the last word.

"A boy like that has no right to be a saint," he fumed.

By this, the fourth day of his visit, Robin had completed the immediate task that had seemed to lie before him, had drunk his cup to its lower drops, and spoken again to both Chris and Margaret upon the subject of their soul's health; so that if he had not met with any apparent success, he had, at any rate, remained faithful to his convictions.

But now that it was all over, now that his message had been delivered, and he had been placed, as the almost inevitable result, he supposed, in a sort of kindly isolation, there came upon him a curious tide of reaction, a desire to tear off this imaginary surplice with which he knew that they had invested him, to shake himself free from these hundred new scruples, and to plunge again into the older and more careless comradeship of other days. For a little while the sense of his spiritual victory had deserted him, and he would like to barter his heavenly garments for an earthly fustian and a genial fireside.

He had been for a visit this afternoon to his old house-master at Drayton; and now, walking home across the upland country by way of Wrayley, the cold wind and an early dusk lent an appropriate setting to his mood. And yet, of course, this was only the mere cloud of a moment. Soon it would pass; and he must not let himself become despondent. He remembered Elijah, and how, in a similar gulf of experience, his high calling had returned to him.

It was no still, small voice that broke the silence now,

however; but, instead, the rather boisterous utterance of Bob Herrick.

"Hullo, my pocket-sculptor!" he shouted. He was climbing up from Wrayley to his studio on the Drayton Road; and at his side was a woman whom Robin did not recognize. Bob's simple sense of humor rarely extended itself into new channels; and Robin had been his pocket-sculptor ever since, a dozen years ago, he had caught him making clay animals in his garden. The three of them met at his cottage gate.

"Allow me," he said to his companion, "allow me to present Mr. Rivers—Robin—Judy. Judy—Robin."

They stared at one another in the half-light; and then Judy rippled into laughter.

"How funny!" she said.

"What's funny?" asked Bob. "Are you two pals already?"

Judy laughed again, and Robin became aware that she was regarding him with a kind of self-possessed amusement; became aware, also, of a whole host of alien experiences touching hands for a moment with his own.

"I don't know," she said; "are we?"

Bob pushed them before him into the garden path.

"Well, you've got to be now, anyway," he said.

They made themselves known to one another.

"And so it was really you?"

"How rum!"

"And to think of meeting out here in the wilds."

"And are you a sculptor, really?"

"And fancy your knowing Broggers, and Chris, and all of them, and old Bob."

They told him the story over their teacups.

"I always said you were a dangerous young

woman," observed Bob, "but, look here, we're three hours late already; and the last train goes back at nine."

"There was an accident on the line, you know," explained Judy to Robin. "I ought to have been here by three o'clock."

She was sitting for Bob's latest inspiration—a Circe, with her foot upon a pig, already cast in the marble and very nearly finished—a self-confessed mediocrity, Robin fancied, but for the moment the apple of Bob's eye.

Judy was sitting for the hands to-day; and Robin found himself examining them rather critically. They were neither large nor small, he noticed, and looked both strong and delicate. He felt that he should like to try and model them himself, and that with quite a little practice he would be able to do so very easily. He thought Bob's laborious efforts rather amusing; and lingered for an hour or two in the studio, watching him as he chiseled. He had a habit of grunting to himself every now and then—at the graceful fingers, Robin supposed, that he was finding so woefully elusive.

When he left them at last to get home in time for supper, Judy waved her hand to him from the throne.

"You must come and see me, sometimes," she said. And he promised that he would do so.

"I think I rather like my cigarette-boy," she confided to Bob.

Bob was standing back, surveying his Circe with a certain revulsion of feeling.

"Lord!" he said, "what a stick she looks, after all! Why can't I catch you, Judy?"

She shook her head.

"I'm rather hard to catch, you know," she said. "Everything is, that's worth catching at all."

"Do you think she's good?" asked Bob. "Honestly, now—do you really think she's good?"

"In a way," said Judy, cocking her head, and looking at her representative through half-closed eyes. "In a way she's even too good—she's almost pious."

Bob groaned.

"I knew it," he said. "She's just like all the rest of them; and I'd hoped—I'd really thought, Judy——"

"Poor old Bob!" she said.

The astonishing innocuousness of his creations was, perhaps, their brightest feature.

"I think it must be your county-family conscience, you know," she continued. "I rather like it; but it's simply fatal in a studio. I think that's why you'll never do anything really good."

Bob winced.

"You're very honest," he said.

"That's because I've got a conscience, too," she nodded.

He took her hands suddenly.

"I wish to God you hadn't, Judy," he said,—“I wish to God you hadn't.”

"No, you don't," she said. "Not really. Because, if I hadn't, you'd ask me to marry you; and then next minute you'd repent—and if in the meantime I had accepted you—*voilà!*"

She jumped down from the throne.

"Now, we won't be silly any more," she said, "and if you're good I'll show you something rather beautiful. It's an idea that came to me last night."

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She slipped off her clothes behind the screen; and next moment, making him stand at the far end of the studio, she had climbed up on to the marble knees of the Circe, and was sitting there with her arms about its neck.

For a moment the effect was a sheer triumph, catching his breath, as though the garment of her own over-running vitality had descended upon the statue beneath her; as though, veiling its incompetence, it had snatched it up into immortality.

"Now, look!" she cried, and half turning her face from him, she pressed her lips against the Circe's mouth.

But, alas! the kiss, that should have completed the illusion, served only to emphasize the real contrast—his handiwork, the mere pedestal to her loveliness, and Judy herself set there like a pink rose on the bosom of death.

"Well," she said, "isn't it rather pretty?"

"Horribly pretty," he said at last.

"If you were a colorist, it might make your fortune, don't you think? It might be the picture of a generation. You might call it 'The Sirens,' or 'Sisters,' or something."

But he shook his head.

"I should call it the 'Rubicon,'" he said slowly. "It shows just how far sculpture, or mine at any rate, can go; and, Lord! what a little way it is."

She began to laugh at him again.

"I know," she nodded. "Here have all the carvers, from—from Phidias down to Herrick, been wearing their lives out—you're standing the strain very well, though—to capture a little beauty; and then some broken-down painter man marries a French

shop-girl, and, behold,"—she made him a bow,—“it's bad luck, isn't it?”

But when she had dressed, and must be leaving for the station, he took her hands again, her eyes shining out to him in the dancing lamplight.

“By God, Judy,” he said, “how you could play the Circe, if you would—if you only would!”

They stood looking at one another for a minute; and then she shook her head, with a sudden gravity.

“But not to your pig, Bob,” she told him. “You're too good to be a pig, you know.”

Judy's hands clung about Robin's memory for the first mile of his homeward journey. He could see them as they lay folded there upon her knees for Bob to model. He could imagine them held out in welcome, or touched together in prayer. By Jove, and he believed that he could do them justice, too. He would like to do them justice. It would be worth doing. He began to realize that he had just spent a very happy hour—the happiest almost of his holidays. What a good sort old Bob was; and Judy, too, for the matter of that. Between them, they had managed to make him feel very jolly and peaceful. He must try and see some more of them. But then, suddenly, as Blend came once more into sight, a few twinkling lights above the dusky meadows, it flashed upon him that of course they had known nothing about his religious convictions. Perhaps, indeed, he ought to have told them. He had never thought of it. Well, sooner or later they would find out; and so another door of intimacy would be shut upon his life.

The sense of friendlessness that had come down upon him earlier in the afternoon returned to him

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now with a double emphasis, by contrast to this unreflecting hour that he had just left behind him. And yet in a sense he had forced the situation upon himself; while, even if he were to revolt now, things could never be as they had been before. And, besides, he was not going to revolt. He had chosen the better part. Soon he would see the stars again, if not the sunshine; and for a crown upon his hopes, and because even the darkest hour must go to its grave at last, there fell now an unexpected ray of light upon his path.

For there, upon the hall table, was a letter awaiting him, greeting him, like a strong hand, upon some desolate and disconsolate journey. He snatched it up; and the first sight of it—the sight of his own name in the clear, decided writing—lent heels to darkness and all vague, despairing thoughts; so that, as he read, his heart went warming out again to all less fortunate mankind.

“MY DEAR ROBIN” (it said),—“We were all very glad to hear of your safe arrival at Blend, and hope that you will return to us all the better for your week in the country.

“I am so glad, too, to hear of the splendid stand that you have made, though it must have been very hard for you. But how wonderfully one is helped through these difficult occasions.

“I was so proud and pleased that I showed this particular portion of your letter to Ralph (I know you won’t mind) and he was delighted. ‘Good old Robin!’ he said. It has helped us both, so that you see your trial has brought forth some fruit already.

“I can quite see your difficulty in tackling a man

like Mr. Lomax, who seems to be so very near the Kingdom, and is so much older than you, and to whom you have always been taught by your mother to look up. But all the same I think, if the opportunity occurs, that you should do so. 'Let no man despise thy youth,' as St. Paul said to Timothy. And the same applies to Mr. Brogham, who, however, must be a very much harder problem. He is such a 'good sort,' as you say; and yet, by living a life so obviously regardless of anything higher and more lasting than mere earthly comfort and happiness, it seems to me that he is all the more a danger both to himself and others. I'm afraid I can hardly help you here; but I enclose a small booklet called *The Last Four Days of a Colonel's Lifetime*, which shows the influence of a sudden announcement of death to such a man as Mr. Brogham must be. It is a booklet that has been wonderfully owned to the blessing of many souls; and, if you could leave it about where he might find it, I think that it might perhaps prove the means of making him think more seriously about these things.

"We are all very well, and shall be glad to welcome you back to us again next week. I am remembering you daily.—With best wishes, your sincere friend,

"BETTY WING."

Robin read this letter several times, and it would be hard perhaps to exaggerate the stirring influence that it exerted upon him. For, coming just then, it sounded in his ears exactly the note (and how like Betty that was) that his soul had been yearning to listen to. It might almost have been a message from headquarters to some forlorn and chilly outpost.

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It told him that he was not forgotten; nay, more, it lent a halo to this difficult part that he was playing. It was the tangible and abundant reward of his painful vigil—a reward at once so gracious and overwhelming that he found it almost difficult to credit it.

Presently, bolting up to his bedroom three steps at a time, his mother met him on the landing.

"Have you had a jolly afternoon?" she asked him as he kissed her.

"Oh, ripping!" he said; "simply ripping!"

But, next morning, glancing casually through the columns of the newspaper, he discovered that Death had written a postscript to this letter in his breast-pocket. For, to an account of the railway accident at Ealing that had delayed Judy upon her journey to Wrayley, there was appended a brief list of the unfortunate victims. And among these he read the name of Ralph Atherton Wing, age twenty-three, of an address in Highbury.

CHAPTER IX

WHICH TAKES AN ANGEL UNAWARES

IF Robin had been conscious of a certain breach between himself and his friends at home, Ralph's death would seem to have emphasized it. For, though it might have cast upon the little community at Blend no greater a shadow than any so tragical and unexpected an event must have done upon persons of sympathy, it served to mark something of an epoch in his relations with the Wings. After this he would be more closely bound to them than ever. For death had come to them as he might come to an army. The gap must be filled rather than mourned, and Robin, returning to a house—darkened, it might be, but tearless—found himself hailed as the obvious successor to Ralph's place in the ranks.

"It's almost," Betty said to him, "it's almost as if God had been planning it for you. A few weeks ago, and you wouldn't have cared to do it—you wouldn't even have been—have been qualified. And now——"

And now that Ralph was gone, who so conveniently placed as Robin to carry on his labors for God?

So, with a humble heart, and a very full sense of his responsibility, he took this new mantle upon his shoulders and began to make his way, week by week, to the vanboys in Islington—cheerful souls

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who accepted their change of leadership with an unruffled equanimity. While to emphasize further the melancholy truth that none of us, howsoever devoted, is indispensable to any cause whatever, Jim had almost immediately offered himself as a substitute to the missionary society under whose banner his brother had hoped to serve; and had been accepted with both gratitude and enthusiasm. Thus the wheels of custom, jolted for a moment by these somber fingers, had very soon resumed their equilibrium in circumstances less altered than might have been expected; and, indeed, the unanimous courage with which this family bore its bereavement became a matter of common remark—a splendid and stirring example, as their minister said, of how a cross should be borne.

“And I hear, Miss Wing,” he observed to Betty some three weeks after the funeral, “I hear that your father is preparing a little biography of poor Ralph and that you are helping him.”

Betty nodded.

“I’m afraid that we haven’t begun yet,” she said. “We have been so busy, you see, arranging for the continuation of his work in Islington and elsewhere; but I hope to start going over his papers very soon.”

He looked sympathetically into her steady eyes.

“A painful task, I’m afraid,” he said.

Meeting Robin shortly afterwards, he repeated this remark. Poor Betty—Robin had never thought of that, though of course he had heard all about the proposed volume. And now there rose before his vision the picture of her, a sorrowful and pathetic figure, sitting there in Ralph’s bedroom, poring over his documents and surrounded on every side by a

hundred tokens of her dead brother. A sudden wave of pity and indignation welled up in him. It was too cruel. He was on his way to Islington, after a hasty tea; and at Highbury Station he met Peter returning, bag in hand, from a clerical conference. He spoke to him rather warmly.

"And I—I think it's jolly rough on her," he concluded, "so soon after Ralph's death."

Peter looked at him in some surprise.

"Oh, I don't think she'll mind very much," he said. "Of course, it will be—painful; but then she—we none of us—sorrow, you know, as those that have no hope." And he laid his hand kindly on Robin's shoulder. But later, thinking this over, a new idea flitted suddenly across his mind. For the past few weeks he himself had been praying about the advisability of selecting Miss Chapman, of the Canonbury Deaconesses, to be his future helpmate; and as a consequence his thoughts were apt just now to run a little in one channel. Half turning, he watched Robin's disappearing figure, threading its way down Upper Street.

"Now, I wonder," he said. "I wonder——"

For four or five hours, ever since lunch-time in fact, Betty had been devoting herself to this preliminary duty, assigned to her by her father, of sifting from Ralph's heterogeneous literature such matters as would be helpful to the biography in hand. She had read his diaries, underlining and erasing. She had collected and classified such notes of his old addresses, Bible-studies, and the like, as he had left in his bedroom drawers. And, finally, having forgotten to go down to tea, she was at

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work upon an old cabinet of letters—notes from vanboys, roundhand epistles from some of the children to whom he had preached at the seaside during his last summer holidays, lines of testimony from fellow-workers, one or two closely-written histories from missionaries abroad, a few brief words of encouragement or appreciation from one or other prominent pastor or evangelist; and, with all these, notices of bygone meetings, conventions for the deepening of the spiritual life, evenings of prayer, and rescue campaigns.

From these, when she had gathered and arranged them, her father would not find it difficult to recreate the atmosphere in which his son had lived and had his being—in which, so far as that went, they had all lived for as long as she could remember, the only atmosphere, indeed, of real spiritual progress.

Looking up for a moment, her eyes caught sight of the little globe upon the chest of drawers, representing the world and its religions, with its tiny patch of white shining out there from the enveloping blackness. And it was just then that there came a knock at the door; and Jim stepped briskly into the room.

"Hullo!" he said; "still busy? I say, I've just heard some jolly good news. There's a sudden vacancy in China, and I'm to go in September. Isn't it grand?"

He put his hand upon the globe, and the feel of it reminded him of something.

"And they've asked me to speak at the College Volunteer Conference next week," he went on.

Betty nodded.

"Yes," she said. "I'm speaking there, too."

"You?" asked Jim, with a shade of anxiety in his voice; "are you really? They never told me. Were you going to talk about old Ralph?"

"I was going to refer to him, of course," said Betty.

He sat down upon the table, swinging his leg with a certain agitation.

"I say! Look here!" he said. "We—we mustn't clash, you know. I'm talking about him, too. What's going to be your line? Mine's 'Be thou faithful unto death.'"

Betty reassured him.

"Oh, that'll be all right," she said. "They've put me down to talk about home life—Christianity in the home—so that mine would be only a passing reference, 'and the odor of the ointment filled the house.'"

"I say—that's rather good," said Jim critically; and at the same moment Mr. Wing came into the room behind him.

"Well," he said, looking across at Betty, "have you heard Jim's good news? I've just had a letter from the Society. They are very touched by your promptitude, Jim."

He grasped the boy's elbow.

"And you'll be Ralph's spokesman out there, besides your own," he added, "and the Master's. And that reminds me, Betty, I've just thought of a title for our little volume: 'Yet Speaking.' It's simple, and, please God, it'll prove to be appropriate."

When they had gone Betty bent over her pile of letters once more. Events were coming rather fast just now. Ralph was gone—what a full and

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useful life, though, his had been!—and now Jim was going. While Peter—but looking up, she saw Peter standing in the doorway. His discovery was already hovering upon his lips, but for a moment the sense of Betty's obvious unconsciousness kept him silent. She gave him a couple of letters the contents of which had rather impressed her. He read them slowly and handed them back to her; and then, with a half-smile, told her of his encounter with Robin.

"And, d'you know, Betty," he said at last, "I half believe that he's in love with you;" which was an idea so breathlessly improbable, and so completely incongruous both with the task in hand and the whole habit of her outlook upon life, that Betty would most certainly have thrust it from her meditations, if not from her memory, had not these words of Peter's become the prelude of a far more startling and revolutionary incident that now came tripping upon its heels.

For presently, going up to his bedroom, Robin caught sight of her through the half-opened doorway—a bent figure against the deepening violet of the sky, still held there to a task that, every moment, must be setting a fresh wound in her sorrowing heart. Knocking at the door, he entered the room, and stood beside her, holding his candle shoulder high. In his breast-pocket there still lay a much read and rather crumpled letter; and some day, though not now, under the shadow of death, he was going to tell her a secret. But how pale her cheeks were, though to Betty, looking up at him through the twilight, and remembering, in spite of herself, Peter's ridiculous surmise, they seemed curiously hot.

"I say," he said, "I'm—I'm so—so awfully sorry, you know."

And then, when for the moment she could think of nothing to say to him, but bent again above her letters, he stooped suddenly—so that when at last her head pressed her pillow upstairs, it was neither the result of her biographical labors, nor the tidings of Jim's approaching departure, nor even the absurdity of Peter's so-called discovery, that filled her thoughts to overflowing; but, instead, the extraordinary fact that Robin, being on the brink of his legal manhood, and imagining upon her cheek a grief less bravely borne than perhaps had really been the case, had applied to it an entirely unexpected, and, it must be confessed, a rather earthly consolation.

But this was the black night for Robin, when self-reproach, like an angel of doom, stalked about his bedroom. Bitterly it catechized him. How could he ever have done such a—such a blackguardly deed? How could he ever have intruded himself so grossly upon the privacy of her sorrow? And how, alas, how could she ever—ever forgive him? His horizon became desolate before her withdrawn presence, before the shut heart that would now be all that he must expect. What a cad he had been! What a blundering, boorish cad! He would give all that he had, yes, and ever so much more—he would work like Jacob for twice seven years—if he could only recall the deed of that awful, impetuous moment.

An impartial observer, in fact, might have discovered him to be even more perturbed than the victim of his unguarded impulse, although the moonlight, creeping late into her room, found her

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still awake. But then the night was so warm, no wonder that she couldn't rest. What had Robin meant, though? And why had he suddenly turned so red, and bolted from the room? And what were those words that he had muttered so low that she could not hear them?

She pushed back the bedclothes, and crept on tiptoe to the window, staring out into the silver night.

And was this anger, or pain, or fear that would not let her lie still and go to sleep? Or was it—she looked up into the quiet sky—could it be possible that God, out of the greatness of His heart, was even now preparing for her some new, some most surpassing gift?

CHAPTER X

WHICH SETS HER UPON A THRONE

BUT on the single occasion during the next day when Robin might conveniently have apologized to Betty for his strange lapse of good conduct, he found himself hopelessly tongue-tied. And upon the day following she left London with her aunt for a month's visit in the country; so that there would occur no further opportunity of casting himself upon her mercy until the day of Jim's farewell meeting at Exeter Hall, for which, of course, she would return to town.

This fell towards the end of August, a veritable dog-day, in the most breathless period of the city's summer, when, in spite of the splashing of hoses and water-carts, the streets lay torrid and shadowless, the abiding place of all those faint effluvia that even the most stringent sanitation cannot entirely suppress. Children, who had been London-bound through the long months, lolled here with listless faces, too limp to play, and fretful of clothes, while their elders, pallid and perspiring, went about their necessary duties with loosened garments and tempers on edge. And yet it was too hot to quarrel, too hot even for Highbury to shrug its shoulders and thank God that it was not as Poplar or Bethnal Green; while to its returning humanity, descending, as evening drew near, from trams and omnibuses, it could offer very little solace for all their sultry hours in the city offices.

Among the thousands Robin came back less oppressed perhaps than the majority, since the novelty of his London life, being yet unworn for him, had contrived to triumph over the weather. He was a pilgrim, still faring along a road sufficiently strange to engross his attention; while even the heat itself, brooding upon granite pavements and dusty asphalt, offered him an inspiriting comment upon changed circumstances, in that it had necessitated the acquirement of a summer suit, the first that he had ever purchased with his own earnings. He was wearing it to-day, the feel of it brisker than twenty zephyrs, and a pleasant accompaniment to visions of Betty and vague dreams of future happiness. For these were buoyant days, after all; and the cloud that at first had swept over half his sky, was dwindling now to such reasonable proportions that surely if he and Betty were meant for one another (he could never, never be worthy of her, of course) it might not permanently stand between them. Such a thought might well lend anybody wings, even if the earth that he was treading were no more romantic than Highbury Fields.

"Good gracious!" cried somebody, "what energy! And how delightfully cool you look!"

Robin was pulled up short, and looking up beheld two eyes encountering his own, sparkling, laughing a little at his show of confusion. Looking down for a moment, he became conscious of the tips of two russet shoes; and that his gaze was traveling up from them over a summer frock, a wonderful frock, restless, dainty, and as clean and satisfying as beech-leaves in spring.

It was just the sort of frock that he would have

associated with Judy, if he had ever thought about the matter. And how well it became her; while if he were cool, why, then, she must be coolness itself, if coolness could ever be so radiant and warm-blooded as this. He noticed that her hair, coiled about her head, but not too carefully, dropped a glowing shadow over the richness of her coloring; and that when she smiled her teeth were as white as these marguerites that she was carrying. It was odd, though, that her beauty should have taken him by surprise like this; because surely it would have been the first thing that any one must realize who had ever met her face to face, as he had done down in Berkshire. And yet to-day it seemed quite new to him.

"So you like my frock?" she asked. "I'm very glad. I didn't think boys ever noticed frocks—at least not your sort of boy. I took a lot of trouble over it."

"I think it's simply ripping!" he said.

She was looking at him meditatively.

"I suppose," she observed, "I suppose that you've quite forgotten that you promised to come and see me."

"N—not exactly," he said, "at least, I remember it now quite well."

"Have you had any tea?"

He shook his head; and she twirled her parasol.

"Hurray!" she cried; "then perhaps you'll honor me by accepting some of mine. You must. You'll cheer me up. You'll be a good Samaritan. I'm feeling rather depressed, you know. It must be the weather. I'm feeling rather old and melancholy."

"Old?" smiled Robin.

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"Well, twenty-nine. Nearly thirty. How old are you?"

Robin was feeling rather young.

"I'm only twenty," he confessed.

"Only twenty?" she repeated; and when they were sitting in her little parlor she lifted her teacup with a flourish and looked at him over the brim.

"*Santé!*" she cried.

"Hullo!" said Robin; "I say, are you French?"

She rattled away to him for the space of three minutes in the language of her birthplace, dropping through swift degrees to the broadest of gutter Parisian; and Robin admitted himself convinced.

"But I'm only half French," she explained. "And there's a muckle pairt o' me just awfu' canny—so there is. I'm a sort of mongrel, you know."

Robin shook his head, laughing. "You're not," he told her, a little surprised at his own boldness; "and I believe you know it just as well as I do."

She leaned back in her chair.

"You mean I'm a rather passable young woman," she smiled; "oh, discerning boy!"

And now, for the first time, Robin became aware of how her knowledge of beauty had found expression in this room that surrounded her. Everything in it, wall-paper, curtains, window-blinds (pulled down now to a fringe of nodding flower-tops), each article of furniture, seemed to bear in itself a reflection of her own personality, clear-cut, healthful, contemptuous of outside banalities—as contemptuous as the twirling dancing-girl in the corner, of the Carrara marble that imprisoned her loveliness. Judy saw him looking at her.

"I told you I was rather nice-looking," she said.

She went over to the little figure, and passed her fingers thoughtfully over the lithe, immobile limbs. "They're not bad, are they? And those feet wouldn't have disgraced Trilby. They're just as Greek as you like, only prettier."

Robin hadn't read "Trilby."

"But, I say!" he cried, "that's better than anything old Bob's ever done, isn't it?"

"Better than anything of Bob's? Well, I should smile, as the Yankees say. I should think it was. It's better than anything of Jack Castleton's. There isn't an Englishman alive who could have done it. That's Bourquin. Haven't you ever been to the Luxembourg? That's the thing that made his name."

"And it's you?" repeated Robin, turning to look at her again. She read the admiration in his eyes, and made him a little bow.

"*C'est moi!*" she said.

They went round the walls together, examining the pictures—rough sketches, for the most part, gathered up from the débris of various studios, but with so much discrimination that, as Judy told him, even a Jewish financier would scarcely have been ashamed to own them.

"I could sell some of them for pounds and pounds," she confided to him; "and I expect some day I shall."

There were photographs of various statues for which she had sat.

"D'you know," said Robin, "I—I once meant to be a sculptor myself—when I was quite a small boy."

She looked at him a little dubiously.

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"Did you really?" she asked. "Oh yes, I remember now. Bob said something about it. Didn't he? But it's not a very profitable occupation, you know, unless—unless you're born to it."

But his rediscovery of an old ambition had set memories working again in Robin's brain; and next moment he was looking at her again with a sudden recollection.

"Why, of course!" he exclaimed eagerly. "How silly of me. You were the Girl at the Door."

"Eh?" said Judy sharply. "The what?"

"The Girl at the Door," he repeated. "It's one of the best things I've ever seen. It's great. And it's you. By Jove, yes, it is you."

Judy was silent.

"Don't you remember it?" he wondered.

"Oh, yes," she said; "I remember it, of course."

It flashed upon her then that to this boy she was no more than Judy, the girl with the cigarette, the model, whom he had met by chance in Herrick's cottage at Wrayley.

"I see," she said, looking at him thoughtfully; "you wouldn't know, perhaps. How funny? He—Dubroullé—the man who painted that picture, you know—he's my husband."

Robin found himself staring at her with his mouth open; and in a moment or two she began to laugh at him again.

"How our ideas topple, don't they?" she said. "Yes, I'm a respectable married woman—not even divorced."

She ran on.

"If I hadn't been—*mon Dieu!* I don't believe I should ever have been here at all. You should have

seen my first interview with Mrs. Boxer—you'd have died nearly—pursed lips—*embonpoint*—the god-mother of all the morals—'And your hoccupation?' she says. I make her my sweetest little bow. I had only crossed the Chammel about a week. '*Je pose!*' says I. A dark look. 'Suppose what?' she says, and drives me back into English. 'I'm a model,' says I; 'I sit for artists.' Bang would have gone the door then if I hadn't been standing in the hall. They're so good in Highbury, you know, but so—so plain, that they simply can't imagine beauty and virtue ever trotting in double harness. 'A model?' gasps she. '*Mais!* but such a very, very good one,' says I; 'so upright—so—so *incroyably* respectable.' I tell you it makes me turn pink to my finger-nails to remember the list of my virtues that I told her then. I bombarded her with them, big guns, little guns, minute guns, rifles, and revolvers. I brought up battalions of references. I almost moved her to tears. Have you ever seen Mrs. Boxer? Then imagine an ironclad wiping its eyes. But she took me, in the end. And now I've almost lived down my profession—not quite, of course; but then I've only been here for about eight years."

Presently she sat down and began to strum upon the piano.

"Do you sing?" she asked him. "No? I do sometimes. I don't know anything about music, you know, except that I never get beyond the brink of it. But then it's rather jolly paddling about in the brink, isn't it?"

She tripped him a waltz, straying off then through a little selection of lyrics from the street, a *descensus facilis* that led her at last to one that set his feet

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dancing in spite of himself, though the words, had she sung them to him (and he understood them), would have driven him from the room with horror-stricken blushes. He leaned upon the piano, forgetting Dubroullé and this hinted tragedy of her married life.

"By George!" he said. "By George, that's jolly!"

She dropped her hands into her lap, and looked up at him with an exaggerated concern.

"You don't think so, *really?*" she asked.

"Rather!" he said. "Why not?"

She shook her head.

"Then I shan't play it to you any more," she said.

"It's a very wicked song, and you're good."

Robin stammered something, with a rising color.

"Oh, yes, you are," she repeated. "It's in your face. You can't keep goodness out of people's faces any more than you can keep out the other thing."

She put her hands on the piano-lid.

"Oh, but you mustn't stop," said Robin. "You mustn't, really. I—I haven't heard any music for ever so long. You must sing me something."

He picked up a piece that was lying upon a chair and handed it to her. It was a chanson of Pierre Ronsard.

"Sing me this," he said.

And it was her singing of this, when at last he had overcome her reluctance, that was to remain the dominating impression of this, his first visit to Judy. He could not understand it all, the haunting words to the half-passionate, half-sad refrain, but the last verse, which he made her sing twice, stuck fast in his memory—

*" Pour effacer mon émoi,
Baise-moi,
Re-baise moi, ma déesse,
Ne laissons passer en vain,
Si soudain,
Les ans de notre jeunesse."*

He thought, too, from the way in which she sang it, that Judy must have found more in the simple words than he might guess, though afterwards she threw the song aside carelessly enough.

"Pooh!" she cried. "It's a silly song. I hate it. I don't know why I ever sing it. It makes me feel sentimental. And I hate feeling sentimental."

She looked at him then with a twinkling eye.

"Don't you think it's time you went away?" she asked him.

And at that Robin made a sudden dive for his watch, seized with apprehensive remorse.

"Oh, by Jove!" he cried, "and I'd promised to be at Exeter Hall nearly an hour ago."

Judy clapped her hands.

"Oh, I knew you were good!" she said; "and Exeter Hall's the very Mecca of goodness, isn't it?"

Robin shook his head.

"I've never been there," he said, "and now I'm too late." Judy tried to comfort him.

"Never mind," she said; "it's sure to be there to-morrow. Those sort of places always are, you know. They dodge the brimstone."

And Miss Wing said that of all the farewell meetings for missionaries leaving England she could remember none more triumphantly successful than this one. Ten young men and maidens had been officially dismissed with the Society's blessing (more blessing,

alas! than cash); enthusiasm had bubbled over; and dear Jim's little speech had been quite one of the best. In fact, it was a thousand pities that Robin could not have been there. How unfortunate that he should have forgotten all about it. It would have been the memory of a lifetime, and as real an impetus for evangelical effort as any that Miss Wing could imagine. She was only too thankful that, in spite of a delayed train, Betty and herself had been privileged to be present.

To Betty this unoccupied month had been doubly welcome, since besides being a little tired after ten months of a London life, she had become suddenly conscious that for herself, at least, the old order of things had changed, if ever so little, and could never be quite the same any more. Into the music of her march there had struck suddenly a new strain, imposed upon the familiar motive to which her feet had hitherto stepped so confidently, and one that she would be glad enough to consider at her leisure. And yet how odd that this should be so—that all this should be the outcome of a no more important event than a boy's impulsive kiss.

How little she had thought, too, when first, after the recognized custom of her family, she had endeavored to turn Robin's thoughts into higher channels, that here perhaps was a life intrusted to her keeping, to cherish, it might be, for all its earthly journey—a life that was to be knit with hers in the sweetest of all communions, that was to tread with hers a common path in the dear Master's service. She must still say "perhaps"; because, though Robin had seemed very earnest, a kiss, after all, might not be so solemn an event to him as it was to herself.

She knew enough of other and worldlier circles to be aware of its varying interpretations; whereupon these country hours had begun to dawdle so incredibly that this little month became inflated to a lifetime. And then, after all, Robin was not to be found in Exeter Hall; so that she did not meet him again until they were all gathered about the supper-table.

She was looking very brown and well, and with a tact that did her infinite credit, and was as fuel upon the altar of Robin's worship, gave never a sign that his breach of courtesy had even lingered in her memory. She was perhaps, indeed, a little more talkative than usual, describing her visit to him across the late supper-table under cover of the general medley of missionary facts and figures that was engrossing the others. She was so glad, too, to hear such great things of the vanboys in Islington, and it was more than good of Robin to have journeyed so regularly to Hoxton during her absence.

Half penance and half pilgrimage, this had been a very real happiness to Robin, and presently, when the meal was finished, he moved to a chair beside her, and related to her all that had been going on there: news of the sick ones, good-tidings of one or two reformations, and a description of the lime-light service, that had resulted in no less than eleven conversions. There was an improvement in management, too, that had occurred to him; and Betty thought this very shrewd and satisfactory.

"I shall be relying on you far too much in a little while," she smiled; and the words went tingling to his inmost heart.

But for a few days this and all subsequent conversations between them were of necessity snatched

from the crowded hours that must always herald a first departure. The hall and schoolroom—every room in the house, very nearly—bore evidences of the approaching rupture. Packing-cases were piled in the corners, wisps of straw, for all the cleanliness of the servants, gleamed here and there in unexpected surroundings, the door-bell rang continually, and boys with parcels wore the front step in a steady procession. For Mr. Wing, distributing nothing of a considerable fortune in superfluous luxury, was determined to give his son as efficient and up-to-date an equipment as money could buy, and did not hesitate to supplement the modest check that the Society had presented for this purpose by one for three or four times the amount.

“He shall travel second-class,” was his mental attitude. “To do otherwise would be to draw an invidious distinction between himself and the other missionaries, to say nothing of placing him very likely in rather undesirable company. But his outfit shall be first-rate, or nothing at all, for the greater glory of God.”

The greater glory of God—this was the day’s note, when at last upon the dock-side their friends and relatives gathered about the outgoing missionaries. And Robin, for all his preoccupation, was caught and enthralled by the spell of the moment. For here was his new religion in a strange and stirring setting, no longer ecstatic and triumphant, no longer upon the mountain-tops, but down upon the plains, and at grips, as he had never realized it before, with the great unheeding world.

To an onlooker it might almost have been pathetic, to a scoffer frankly absurd, this small gathering of

black-coated, earnest figures, so prominent in their own parochial circles, so entirely insignificant out here upon this giant quay. The very hymn, started to warm the waiting moments, a hymn that would have rolled back sonorously enough from text-hung walls over a worshipping congregation, died away like a wisp of smoke upon this somber river mist, was as nothing to the hooting of sirens and the mingled tumult of the commerce upon the water, was unheeded even by the other groups of passengers waiting to embark. While their creed, the one creed, as they were so unalterably convinced, that alone could save the world from doom, how feebly now it figured against the overwhelming grayness of this environing harbor, against these hundred clustered mast-tops gathered here from all the seas. And what a comment upon its mission stood there in the idle figures of this vessel's lascar crew, lolling about upon the deck, and looking down upon this little group of enthusiasts with phlegmatic Eastern eyes.

But for Robin, standing shoulder to shoulder with them, joining in their hymns, and seeing none of these things, the hour held nothing but inspiration. These men about him bore names that the Wings had taught him to revere. They stood for all that was best in Christian England; they were in the van of its spiritual progress; and he was standing at their side. In a sense he was one of them, and the thought thrilled him; while even upon Jim, though still only upon the threshold of it, some halo of his high destiny would seem to have descended. Already he was different, Robin thought. The mannerisms that had sometimes been a little worrying had fallen from him, had been relegated to their proper and unimportant

background, so that now Jim was shaking hands with him—a transfigured and uplifted personality.

For a moment, indeed, there swept over Robin, in consequence of this, a desire to be going abroad at his side, to plant the Cross among these alien nations, to labor among them, and, if need be, die—the best and highest task that life could offer.

Presently they all filed on board; and then, very soon, the call came for friends and visitors to leave the boat. The crew became busy again, and the tug began to pant upon its tow-rope, hooting incessantly. Presently ropes were thrown off, splashing down into the muddy water to be hauled in and curled about the stanchions. Hands were waved, and handkerchiefs fluttered; Jim's face grew small and white, became a mere dot upon the vessel's side. A train rattled in behind them, its engine towards the city, and the watchers upon the shores began to walk away.

“We must be going,” said Mr. Wing.

And if this were not, perhaps, the incident for which the day was to become memorable in the history of this little pilgrimage, it at any rate set the key to which the hours that followed were tuned. For there could be no careless love-making upon such a day as this; and if two lives should join to-day it must be beneath no lesser a star than this that piloted these pioneers of God. Nor would Robin have had it otherwise. It was Betty, more fervently than any of the others, who had lifted his eyes towards it, who had set his feet upon the narrow way that it illuminated. And now he could ask no more of life than that he might have her hand in his along the remainder of the upward journey.

"If only you could forgive me," he stammered.

They were standing, towards evening, in the half-lit and deserted schoolroom. For six weeks he had been bursting with the great apology, had imagined himself making it in all sort of intonations; and had conceived, as he thought (though he was mistaken), all possible replies. But now, if an empire had hung upon his fluency he couldn't have said another word. And for a moment his abruptness and the infection of his sudden embarrassment held Betty equally dumb; so that they stood here looking at one another in an awkward silence.

But the inherited intuitions of a thousand generations, to say nothing of a month or so of pretty continuous cogitation, are not to be set aside by the mere obsession of a boy's shyness; while, after all, no message could be plainer than Robin's, for all its struggling dumbness. (Betty consoled herself with this, when conscience subsequently accused her of an undue boldness.) And because a woman is always older in love than a man, so that if Robin were beginning chapter one, Betty would very nearly have finished the first volume, she gave him, without thought, precisely the one answer that was best fitted to the circumstances. For seeing his face averted, and with not the least intention in the world of being in any degree subtle, she bestowed upon it so sisterly a salute that a pair of very crimson cheeks might quite easily have meant nothing at all. While if Robin should think that they did. . . .

There was to come a time later when Robin would find perhaps a different significance in the fact that here, in the schoolroom that had cradled the Wings,

he should have plighted his troth with Betty. But now it was the appropriate ending to the lesson that they had taught him.

"Not the ending though," smiled Betty, "only the beginning. But we must learn the rest together"—magical words that set free whole floods of pent-up eloquence.

Presently they knelt down together side by side, while Betty in her clear voice thanked God for this love, whose chief end after all was merely to unite them closer to Himself. And then Mr. Wing came in, waving in his hand a bundle of the advance proofs of Ralph's biography. At first he cut across the current of their emotions with a remark so prosaic that they might very easily have laughed, if the moment had not been quite such a solemn one. But something in the atmosphere of the room pulled him up short, so that he began to stare from one to the other of them with a puzzled expression in his eyes.

"Hullo!" he said. "Eh—what's this? What's the matter?"

They were standing with their backs to the asbestos stove; and now Betty took Robin's hand.

"He loves me," she said to her father; "Robin loves me."

"And are you quite certain that you know your own heart in this matter—that you will never change?" asked Mr. Wing, in his study, grappling with this new aspect of his daughter's future.

But Robin's conviction sent him smiling to his desk.

So all the world fell into harmony to-night, and the stars shone down upon the completed scheme of Robin's life. Even Jim, he thought, out there upon

the sea, was playing his part in the picture—was the parable, as it were, of his own future way with Betty; while across the hushed street he could hear distinctly the tinkle of Judy's piano. He could even recognize the refrain, and found it strangely apposite, though it was odd, since she did not like the song, that she should be playing it again so soon.

“ Pour effacer mon émoi,
Baise moi,
Re-baise moi, ma déesse.”

He was not quite sure of the exact meaning of *émoi*; but of this, at any rate, he was certain, that to-night indeed his goddess had kissed him.

CHAPTER XI

WHICH PLAYS A CHORUS TO THE EVENT

AND here this little record might fitly have ended had Circumstance remained content with the channels so obviously cleft for it. For Mr. Wing, to his credit or the reverse, possessed no swollen ambitions for his daughter (indeed, it is doubtful if the question of her marriage had ever occurred to him), and, provided that she was not to be unequally yoked with an unbeliever, was as content with Robin for a prospective son-in-law as any other. For though, of course, they would not be able to marry for another three or four years, there was very little harm in that, and probably a great deal of good, probation being an excellent ground for the formation of character, in whose soil such sterner virtues as fortitude, patience, and thrift might grow apace.

Next year Robin should have an increase of salary; and the year after, if he comported himself with satisfaction, should be advanced to the position formerly intended for Jim. Upon one thing, however, he must insist, and he was sure that they would see the wisdom of it, and that was that Robin should henceforward live elsewhere. Such an arrangement would be less distracting for the work that both Betty and he had to do; and, while he would always be welcome, and must consider himself as a true son of the house, it would be more satisfactory for everybody concerned

that he should not actually dwell beneath its roof. Mr. Wing knew several earnest Christian families that were only too glad to receive paying guests; or, failing these, there must surely be one or two converted young men in the office with whom he might comfortably cast in his lot.

All this, together with a somewhat detailed description of Betty herself, formed the bulk of one of the thickest letters that George, the postman, had handed to Mrs. Rivers for some considerable time. Its very size, indeed, was a presage of something unusual, and it took no more than a hasty glance to set her heart beating rather quickly.

"Ben't bad news, I 'ope, mum?" suggested George, who had long ago mastered both the handwriting and life history of all regular communicants with Blend. "Master Robin well, mum, I 'ope?"

Presently Esther looked up with a smile. How absurd to have been so excited.

"Oh, yes, George," she said.

His rubicund face was still a little dubious.

"Good news, mum, I 'ope?" he pursued.

"Oh, quite," said Esther—"quite good, thank you, George. He—he's engaged to be married."

The keenest of observers might possibly have detected some slight shade of disappointment upon the postman's countenance, though he concealed this with considerable tact. For this was not much of a capture in the way of gossip, though marriage itself was an institution to be esteemed.

"Be fruitful an' multiply," said George. "The first command it were to fallen man; an', God be praised! 'tis the easiest to foller."

Nor would he own that a family of sixteen had in

any way disillusioned him, though it might have emphasized the difficulties of the subsequent divine injunctions.

"There'll be another come quarter day," he had observed more than once; and it seems probable that some such liberal vision of Robin's future now unfolded itself before his imagination. At any rate, he lent the weight of his approval to the step that Robin had taken.

"'Tis the right thing 'e 'ave done, mum," he said. "An' 'e won't regret it, though I'm not denyin' but what 'tis a 'ard path."

He shook his head, but not in despair.

"'Tis in the Scripture, however," he concluded, "an' there's a hend on it. Nice young lady?"

"I believe so," said Esther. "Very nice."

George touched his cap, and shuffled off down the road.

"So startled as she were, too," he murmured.

In front of him a brewer's dray was rolling slowly through the village, and the rhythm of the horse's hoofs fell in time with his meditations. "Multiply, multiply," they seemed to say to him. "Multiply, multiply,"—the first rung upon the ethical ladder.

And so this was to be her daughter. "She has done more for me," wrote Robin, "than I can ever tell, or ever repay. It was through her that I was led to God"—positive words that made Esther wince, in spite of herself, and feel glad that nobody was looking. But somebody was—regarding her over a battered pipe-bowl with twinkling eyes.

"Well," he said, "more self-reproaches?"

Esther blushed a little.

"How did you guess?" she commanded; "and how long have you been standing there?"

Lomax dropped into a deck chair and crossed his long legs.

"Just long enough to see the wind drop out of your sails a little," he smiled. "And to observe a rather particularly fat letter from Robin. Has he fallen in love?"

"Oh, it's worse than that," said Esther.

"Not married?" asked Lomax.

She shook her head, and he blew a mouthful of smoke towards the sky, where it mixed itself lazily with the autumn air.

"Engaged to Miss Wing?" he hazarded.

Esther dropped her letter, searching his face.

"Do you know her, then?" she asked.

Lomax nodded.

"Met her yesterday," he said, "for the first time. I was staying in town, you know, in Hoxton."

The name was familiar to Esther. It had occurred more than once in Robin's letters to her, and she had looked it up in her map of London.

"My friend is a parson there," explained Lomax.

"Oh, but Betty," said Esther. "Tell me about Betty. Shall I like her, Arthur? And will she—will she like me?"

Lomax was smiling again.

"I'm a bit of a hermit, you know," he proceeded, "and my friend likes to drill me, every now and then, into a proper appreciation of the other side of the picture. His life is a perpetual tumult. He hasn't even time to think. In fact, he's just a little proud of the fact. He has to make the old thoughts do, he says; and they do very well."

He nodded towards Esther.

"And it's good to be reminded of that sometimes, you know."

"Oh," said Esther, "I'm trying so hard not to be rude."

"And Betty," he pursued, "Betty looks at life very much from my friend's standpoint, I should think. Only she belongs to a different denomination. He can't quite forgive her for that. She insists upon working in his parish, you see. I fancy the distrust is mutual."

Esther shook her hands a little.

"You know quite well," she cried, "that I don't know *anything* about standpoints, and denominations, and things. It's Betty I want to hear about, the girl that's going to—going to——"

"Take Robin away from you, eh? Well, she's got a nice complexion, as far as I could judge by lamplight, good eyes, a decided sort of mouth——"

"Is she," began Esther, a little breathlessly, "is she a lady, Arthur?"

She hated herself for asking this; but when he answered there came the smallest sigh of relief.

"Oh, yes," he said decidedly; "and she's good, Esther."

There was a moment's pause.

"Is she *very* good?" she asked then.

But he shook his head.

"I don't think you must ask me that," he laughed.

"Tell me," said Esther, "tell me what she was doing, and how you came to meet her."

He knocked the ashes out of his pipe and searched for his pouch.

"She was playing a harmonium in the street," he explained, "and Robin—Robin was preaching."

Esther gasped.

"Preaching?" she stammered; "Robin preaching in the—in the street, Arthur?" There was even a note of horror in her voice, but he reassured her.

"Oh, it's often done, you know," he said; "and he was really doing it quite well. He has a gift, I think. There's nothing to be ashamed of in it, Esther."

"Oh, I know," she said. "But it's all so—so new."

"I don't think it's even that," he said; "I used to do it myself, you know."

"But you're different."

"Not so very."

He paused a little, and then leaned forward.

"Do you mind if I preach?" he asked.

"Well?" she said.

"Well, then, I think that you mustn't be too anxious about Robin—just now, at any rate. I fancy—I'm quite sure, in fact—that he has climbed, or been pushed, or pulled, up a sort of little religious hilltop, something a trifle emotional, perhaps, and the result partly of human spadework. And because, from the top of it, he's seeing the—the Kingdom, shall we call it?—more clearly than he has ever seen it before, he imagines himself to be a little nearer to it than he really is. Perhaps he imagines also that some of the people below him, who have never had his particular view, but are possibly a mile or two ahead, are really rather farther from it than himself. That's the danger of hilltops; and especially if they don't come quite—quite naturally in the line of route, you know."

"You mean," said Esther, "that if he's to go on marching he'll have to come down again."

Lomax nodded.

"And get back to his own path," he said.

Then, lighting his pipe, he smiled at her again.

"I've told you all this," he said, "because Broggers happened to be with us when we came upon them, and he"—he looked at her meditatively—"he regarded the matter a little differently."

And now, for the first time, the smile, that cannot ever have been very far away, broke into being upon Esther's face.

"Oh, poor Broggers!" she said.

"But he liked her," said Lomax. "Before she had quite grasped who we were, you see, she had given him a tract. And when she did know, she didn't apologize. Of course, there was no reason why she should. But old Broggers made quite a point of it. I think it must have flattered his sense of personal wickedness."

There came a click at the gate, and Broggers himself tramped down the path, mopping his brow. He sank into a chair, and implored Esther for some tea.

"Look at me," he whispered; "just look at me."

"Well," she said. "What's the matter?"

He stared at her gloomily, feeling his left pulse with his right thumb, but addressed his remarks to Lomax.

"I've been to the doctor's," he said. "To the doctor's, Arthur. It was that—that confounded pamphlet. My word!"

He passed a purple handkerchief across his forehead.

"I tell you," he observed solemnly, "I tell you soberly, both of you, that I—I've never had such a

day in my life—never. Lord! what a day. One lump, please, Esther.”

He ate a piece of bread and butter.

“*The Last Four Days of a Colonel's Lifetime*—Miss Wing's tract, you know,” he quoted. “Told he's going to kick the bucket—terrible—scratches Goodwood—sells out his investments—plays the very deuce, generally. Look here!”

He pulled a crumpled booklet from his pocket.

“‘I was returning from my bankers,’” he read, “‘when suddenly—ah, what was that pain, like a knife pressed softly beneath my heart? I stopped short. For now I knew that the doctor had been right, indeed—that this was but the forerunner of the end.’”

Broggers regarded them dramatically during an impressive silence. Then he pulled out his handkerchief again.

“Phew!” he said, “I had a pain just like that last week. And I'd put it down to over-eating. I've been round to see Mulvaney. He was playing croquet. Can you imagine it—a callous, ginger-headed scientist, with all his faculties concentrated upon pushing a grotesque and trivial ball through a microscopical hoop, and me—me tottering metaphorically on the brink of an eternity that I had mistaken for a juggled rabbit.

“‘For God's sake,’ I told him, ‘percuss my heart, Mulvaney.’

“‘Percuss be blithered,’ says he, ‘you've put me off my stroke.’

“‘Mulvaney,’ I says, ‘I'm a dying man, and I want to hear the worst.’

“‘Good Lord!’ says he, ‘phwat the——?’

"‘Never mind that,’ says I, and leads him to his smelly—there’s no other word for it, Esther—his smelly little surgery. I think that was my worst moment—iodoform, you know. But I pulled myself together, and told him to get out his tube while I undressed."

He waved his hand.

"You can picture the scene," he said. "I shall never be the same man any more—never. It’s shattered me, Esther, completely shattered me. But she’s a fine girl, all the same—a very fine girl, and I admire her, Esther—I admire her immensely."

"But Doctor Mulvaney?" asked Esther; "what did he tell you, Broggers?"

Broggers shook his head.

"Sound as a two-year-old. That’s what Mulvaney said. Sound as a two-year-old. Feeling my oats a bit, he said. Oats! Good heavens!"

He held out his cup for some more tea.

"Do you think," said Esther, "do you think you can stand a further shock?"

"Eh?" said Broggers. "What’s that, Esther? No bad news, I hope?"

"Robin’s going to marry her?"

He shook his head.

"I was afraid of it," he said. "I remarked so to Arthur yesterday. Didn’t I, Arthur?"

There was a moment’s silence.

"Have you consented?" he asked her.

Esther wrinkled her forehead.

"Well, you know, they haven’t asked me," she confessed.

"The ruffians!" cried Broggers. "The impertinent young ruffians!"

"They're not getting married just at present, of course."

"But, God bless my soul!" said Broggers, "when I used to propose——" He paused suddenly. "Lord, though, they never accepted me, of course. I forgot that. It makes a difference, doesn't it?"

"Quite a lot," said Esther; "and, besides, one can't legislate about love, you know; and if she loves him, I'm—I'm——"

"Happy," said Broggers.

"I'm happy," she agreed.

"Even if it's the most entirely unsuitable match that could possibly be conceived?"

"But it couldn't be," protested Esther.

Broggers cleared his throat.

"My dear Esther," he said solemnly, "you'll never, never, never be a woman of the world, as long as you live. Will she, Arthur? Why, when I think of my own dear mother and the trouble that she took to select suitable candidates for my affections, I'm—I'm astounded that so little came of it. I am, really. But I'm glad you're happy, Esther. That makes me feel better. It's a sort of mental counterblast to the Colonel. But, ah, these young people—that reminds me, Arthur, I passed your girl just now paddling in the backwater with the Horridge boys and their sister. It's their last day at home. I told her that she ought to be ashamed of herself, paddling with her hair up. But it was no good, Arthur—not the least bit in the world. She merely scoffed at me. It's the Spirit of the Age—ignoring one's elders, plowing one's own furrows. Youth everywhere, age nowhere—it's the Spirit of the Age, Esther; and we've got to face it."

He set down his teacup, and wagged his head rather solemnly. Then his brow cleared a little.

"But I half believe," he added, "that it's been the spirit of all the other ages, too."

"And when's Robin bringing her down to see you?" asked Margaret, later in the evening.

Esther looked up from a bevy of unruly chrysanthemums.

"Not till Christmas," she said. "But Robin's coming down here himself on Saturday for the week-end."

Margaret nodded.

"And you're happy about it? I mean—why, I believe you've been crying."

"What nonsense!" said Esther.

"But you have."

"Well, I'm not crying now, anyway."

They were still standing in the little garden.

"Is it because——?"

But Esther shook her head.

"It's because the best-laid plans of mice and men gang aft agley," she said; "and mine wasn't even a plan—only a dream."

Alas—Margaret would have given a very great deal never to have met Esther's eyes at this particular moment. And yet it was hardly more than the briefest of casual glances that sped between them, and surely far too brief for any one to have discovered this face at her heart's window.

But it was not so, and she knew it—knew quite certainly that, even in so tiny a moment, this mother's wit, playing Blondel in the dusk, had discovered her secret prisoner, would henceforth know his where-

abouts for ever, and was even now calling him by his name, though not in words—*oh, Robin; oh, mon roi!* and are you worthy of yet this other shrine?

Esther stooped again.

"These untidy flowers," she said, and rising, slipped her arm round Margaret's waist.

"Your hands are cold," she said.

"That's because I've been paddling, I expect," said Margaret.

Esther smiled.

"What a baby you are still," she said.

They were at the gate now, and Margaret bent down a little and kissed her forehead.

"I know," she said. "Good-night!"

But, swinging homewards under the gathering stars, she amplified this confession.

"And I'm a beast as well," she confided to the world at large, "because I know this other girl is good, and strong, and has led Robin where I have never even thought about trying to lead him, and has talked to him as I could never have talked to him, and has put his feet where I could never have put them. And she's pretty as well, though that's nothing. But I'm not even that, and yet I'm jealous of her, I'm jealous of her, just as jealous, as jealous as ever I can be."

Half-way down the rectory lane she overtook her father.

"Daddy," she said, linking her arm with his, "I'm a beast. I'm an absolute, unmitigated beast. I shan't tell you why. But I'll tell you that because it's good for me. I'm a Beast."

Lomax looked down at her out of the corners of his eyes.

"And I suppose you think it's my fault," he suggested.

"I shouldn't wonder," she said. "You're sort of responsible for me, aren't you?"

And it was a chance meeting at Paddington, on the following Monday, that made Judy the leisurely mouthpiece of these great tidings to the little circle in Bayswater, and incidentally to Chris. She had been sitting most of the afternoon for Jack, and at tea-time, coming into Lilah's sitting-room, she dropped into an easy-chair in a pretended exhaustion.

"And I'm in a bad temper, too," she explained, nodding her head towards the studio door. "Tommy Twigg's in there, and he's been telling me I'm getting fat."

She regarded Lilah with a frown, half angry and half tragic.

"He tells me I'm getting fat," she repeated, "and the worst of it is, I'm half afraid it's true."

Lilah looked up from her son, who was stretched placidly in her lap, gazing heavenwards with vacant eyes.

"Of course," she said alliteratively, "truth's Tommy Twigg's strong point."

Judy looked a little contemptuous.

"He *thinks* it is. All that Hammersmith crowd think they're the chosen apostles of Truth, just because they paint in all the wrinkles. And as for beauty,"—she spread out her fingers a little,—"*Mon Dieu!* their people are just about as bilious as the Rossetti sort, only they're generally uglier."

She nodded her head.

"I believe Tommy Twigg worships pimples," she said.

"Oh, not at all," said a languid voice in the doorway. "I merely accept them."

Tommy Twigg was a tall young man, with a superior expression and a weakness for cake. He was also the apostle at present of a high and uncompromising Realism.

"I was getting bored in there," he explained to Lilah, making a mental note of the extreme plainness of the human baby at six weeks; "Bergstein's haggling with Jack. If I were painting Mammon, or the Flesh, or something at once gross and sleepy, but infernally adequate, as Kipling would say, I'd ask Bergstein to sit for me. But as I'm not, I thought I'd——"

"Come and eat cake," suggested Lilah. "There's a new sort over there made of walnuts, with chocolate on the top."

She sighed a little.

"If one could only choose one's customers," she added.

"But one can't, you know," said Tommy, going for the cake, "or there wouldn't be any."

"Is Mr. Bergstein coming in to tea?" asked Judy.

"Probably," observed Tommy. "If he thinks he can get it for nothing."

"You see," said Lilah, "he's supposed to be buying the Pandora."

"Then I should think that he's got somebody up his sleeve who'll give a hundred or so more for it; or is he going to make her spout whisky, at a thousand per cent. profit, in the bar of his latest music hall?"

But Bergstein, the great man of the yet greater

man, who dominated half the Variety world on both sides of the Atlantic, refused his tea after all.

"I haf a digestion," he reminded Lilah. "I haf to be ver' careful. The least leetle thing——" He made an expressive gesture with his hands. "So I do not eat between meals."

"But tea *is* a meal," said Judy, setting her healthy teeth into a second bun.

Bergstein smiled at her sleepily. He knew that she was a model, having met her an hour before in Jack's studio, at the conclusion of a sitting.

"Mademoiselle makes a joke," he said. "Did she sit for the leetle Pandora?"

"Madame," corrected Judy sweetly; "and she didn't."

Bergstein's eyes opened a little wider, as though Judy were about to reverse his previous impression of her. They embraced her with a new interest.

"Ah," he said, still smiling, "I should haf known better. Madame was not—not sufficiently *p'tite*, heh? Madame is rather—Juno—heh?"

Tommy winked at Judy behind Bergstein's broad back.

"I told you you were getting fat," he whispered. But Bergstein had excellent hearing.

"Ach no," he said, "not fat, only a ver' leetle bit—ploomp, heh?"

At the doorway he met Chris, who stood aside to let him pass and then lounged into the room, a bronzed and rather insular contrast to this prosperous cosmopolitan. It was his first day in London, he explained to them, for two months. He had slain grouse in August, and partridges in September, and had now returned from some Norfolk stubbles.

Also he was feeling a little depressed; which reminded Judy suddenly of her yesterday's meeting with Robin.

"As pleased with himself as anything, he was," she concluded. "Of course, I told him he was very silly, at his age, too—only twenty. But it didn't seem to make any impression on him."

"It wouldn't," said Tommy. "Youth's always self-complacent, you know. I think I must have been beastly when I was twenty."

"Let me see," said Judy. "You're just twenty-four, aren't you?"

"Twenty-five," he corrected. "Twenty-five last June."

Chris helped himself to several pieces of bread and butter, and looked at Judy nonchalantly.

"He—er—didn't say anything about the—the girl, I suppose?" he suggested.

Judy shook her head.

"There wasn't time," she said. "He'd just come back from his home. He didn't even tell me her name. And I had to catch my train. I was sitting for Bob, you know."

"Coming back from Blend?" repeated Lilah. "Oh, it must be Margaret. It must be. Mustn't it, Chris?"

But Chris could tell them nothing. He hadn't been near the place, he said, for more than two months, and had seen very little of Robin all the summer.

"And I thought you were all such great pals, too," reproached Lilah.

Chris was rather red.

"So we are," he said, with an illogical feeling of having been somehow betrayed.

"I knew she was fond of him, of course," pursued

Lilah; "but I don't believe he's good enough for her, all the same. I mean I think he's too good." She remembered the incident of the tableaux. "He's *frightfully* good, isn't he, Chris?"

Chris mumbled something into his teacup.

"How's the kid?" he asked her.

But ascending to his own flat he discovered himself to have been rather more disturbed by this incident than he had ever been disturbed by anything before. And temperamentally, like his uncle, he hated being disturbed.

"Not that I should mind them being fixed up, if —if they're keen on each other," he kept assuring himself. "I'm not cad enough for that. But they might have told me."

He surveyed so much of the metropolis as unfolded itself before the landing-window, with a baleful eye. Even the air, wafted hither from the park, seemed sickly and stale after the brisk offerings of heather and bracken. He leaned out of the window, and looked down upon the dusty roadway and beyond this to the steady stream of traffic between Notting Hill and the Marble Arch. It was sufficiently beastly to have had to come back to this in the loveliest week of September. Fate needn't surely have added any further touch to his welcome home. And besides, now that he came to think of it, he had never even been aware until to-day that Judy and Robin were acquainted.

"Oh, damn it all! *damn* it all!" he observed to the rolling universe. "Damn evewything!"

But in his own parlor, where he beheld Robin awaiting him upon the hearthrug, with his hands in his pockets, he felt a little better again.

"I've just heard the news," he said to him; "I'm jolly glad. You're a lucky chap."

Robin explained the reason of his visit. He was to find a new lodging for himself.

"It's better, you see, that Betty and I——"

"Betty!" shouted Chris; "Betty! Why, by Jove! you—you're engaged to Miss Wing then?"

Robin laughed.

"Of course, who else?" he said.

Chris scratched his head.

"By George!" he said; "of course, of course."

And then, because he couldn't think of anything more to say, just for a moment, he stood staring at Robin with his mouth open.

"So you see, I've got to clear out," repeated Robin. Chris was enthusiastic. It was the very thing. Of course Robin must come to the flat. There was lots of room. Chris had always been lonely. By Jove! he had never realized till this moment exactly how lonely he had been. And it would cost Robin nothing; well, if Robin insisted, only his fair share of the provisions. The rooms were there. If he didn't live in them, nobody would.

"But I say," said Robin at last, "that was rather rum. Who did you think I was engaged to?"

Chris hesitated, and then told him—so ridiculous a mistake, that half-way down the long flights of stairs Robin found himself chuckling out loud.

"A kid like Margaret," he said. "Well, I'm blessed! What an extraordinary idea!"

One further incident of this autumn afternoon, presenting, as it does, a certain comment upon the accepted character of Chris among his friends, may

perhaps be held worthy of record. Mrs. Pollock, at any rate, found it sufficiently surprising. For entering presently with the preliminaries of his dinner, she beheld her master apostrophizing (presumably) his own image in the mirror. His arms were outstretched, and his voice was more than a little fervent.

"You darling!" he was saying earnestly, "oh, you little darling!"

His arms were still half beckoning, indeed, when he turned at her approach.

"An' me hold enough to be your ma, too," she reproached him, in shocked tones.

"Never mind," said Chris, tipping up her ample chin with his finger. "You *are* wather a darling all the same, you know," and he kissed her forehead.

CHAPTER XII

WHICH BOWS TO A BRAGGART IN CLAY

THERE had never been such a homecoming as this, never in all the record of Christmases past—a homecoming at once so glad and so solemnly triumphant. Paddington had set the note, where standing alone, and a little apart upon the crowded platform, Robin had seen Betty awaiting him for their first journey together—Betty, under the booking-office lamp, with the furs that he had given her nestling about her neck and touching her cheek, with his ring upon her ungloved hand, and her eyes drawing his, like a magnet, from among these departing legions. Paddington had set the note, and the flying wheels beneath the carriage had gathered it up into their music, half chant and half pæan, with just enough of apprehension to set an edge to its exultation. And this was only natural, though a look from Betty could send it staggering out of the score altogether, because, of course, so much was going to depend upon these first impressions.

Through a glimmer of tangled lights, they crashed down the long platforms at Slough, that fled behind them, licked up into the night, like the splutter of a match; and so out again between these flat Buckinghamshire meadows, stretching back mysteriously on either side. How jolly and black they looked, too, when one rubbed a sleeve across the steamy

window, with their red lamps twinkling softly, like fallen stars, out there in the darkness, beckoning for a moment or two and then blotted out for ever behind these whirling hedgerows.

Every now and then Betty would smile at him across the hot carriage, or lean forward to ask him how far they had traveled. Maidenhead was passed now, and Twyford. High banks shut away the country from them; and in a minute or two the brakes would be on to draw them up at Reading. This was the homeland. Couldn't Betty smell the air of it, how different it was from that of Highbury and the City! And at Wrayley the contrast was greater still—Wrayley, with its old-world, well-kept cottages, with its suggestion of country manors, tucked snugly away behind surrounding trees, with its perpetual leisurely atmosphere of aloofness from the perspiring markets of toil, an aloofness that amounted, indeed, to a gentle denial that a perspiring underworld existed at all.

Here upon the platform were grooms and footmen, neatly liveried, with rosy cheeks above armfuls of luggage; and behind them tall men in ulsters, with golf-bags and gun-cases, rich women in sables, and little page-boys. So well colored they looked, so completely sure of their particular rights, that it was hard to believe them passengers from London, where Hoxton was, and Bethnal Green, with all their shabby, pale-faced millions—sermons here for Betty, perhaps, though not for Wrayley, lending its tacit emphasis to the just claims of prosperity to its enjoyment. For all this was not, and indeed had never been meant, for the crowds. The crowds were behind now, behind and before perhaps; but not here, or

at any rate to no greater extent than that of a few brown-faced farmers returning from Reading market. Here was only assurance and acquiescence—the broad highway for rubber-tired carriage wheels, and the hedge side for hobnails; no jostling and clamoring here, but a general acceptance of the immemorial order of things, Wrayley welcoming its own again, as conservative as old Thames down there in the darkness.

In a moment or two whips would be laid about glossy flanks, and the little cluster of broughams and buses would begin to disperse, driving down the station hill, their lamps raying the whitened hedges and the frozen ruts in the road. Barker was here, tending a couple of Broggers' Christmas visitors to a high dogcart with an impatient mare. And here, in the rectory pony-cart, lent by Lomax, was Esther awaiting them at the end of the little procession. Perhaps Robin had never been quite so proud of his mother before, as young almost, in this frosty lamplight, as the girl that he led to greet her. At any rate, he had never felt quite so glad that here was a mother of whom anybody might be proud; and her welcome to Betty was sweetness itself.

The pony's hoofs rattled musically down the Oxford Road, the river on their right, swollen with recent rains, moving somberly down towards the lock and Wrayley Weir.

"But you ought to have seen it in the summer-time," said Esther, jealous for her valley. "It's so bleak and bare now."

Not to Robin, though, or even Betty, seeing all these things for the first time, her face towards the sweet wind and her spirit comfortably reassured

that Robin's mother was at least not so obviously worldly as she had hitherto contrived to suspect. And this was no silent homecoming either, like another in Robin's memory, when the load of a holy but somewhat exacting mission had borne upon his mind. There, across the river, were the long windows of Broggers' house, Whinchurch Hall, where they would be dining on Christmas night; and there, at the corner of his park, was the keeper's cottage, and beyond it the first upward swelling of the Deerlock woods. The river was shut away from them now by an avenue of naked elms; and this was the Screw Bridge, where the road bent round to the left and crossed the main line of the railway. Here were the big gates of Blend Park, and the lights of the village; and here, upon the right, was Robin's own little home behind the tall hedge.

Margaret was leaning against the gate, her hands in her pockets, waiting to drive the pony on to the rectory stable. The two girls greeted one another; and Robin, with his feet upon the hard road, and his breath like smoke, stretched his arms luxuriously.

"By Jove!" he said to Margaret, "it's great to be home again—simply great."

He watched the retreating forms of his mother and Betty, arm in arm up the garden path. "And mother's been ripping to her," he added, "ripping!"

Margaret climbed into the pony-cart.

"Of course," said Robin, "it must be pretty beastly for a girl coming down like this, you know, for—the first time."

Margaret nodded emphatically.

"Rather!" she agreed; "I should simply hate it."

Robin regarded her meditatively. Her appreciation of the position would seem to reveal a certain progress of character.

"I say," he said quickly, "you—you'll help to make it decent for her down here, won't you, Margaret?"

She whipped up the pony.

"I'll do my best," she said.

And they all did their best, so much so, indeed, that Betty felt herself less in danger of being carried away from her moral position by the frowning forces of chilliness or persecution than by the sheer high spirits of all these light-hearted people;—a strange Christmas this, for Betty, yet happy as well, in spite of an underlying sense that she must brace herself back a little against the tide of this too irresponsible gaiety. And this was harder perhaps, because although there was no doubt of the necessity for it, it was so difficult to discover a point of solid foothold. Even on Christmas Day, when such a moment seemed suddenly to present itself, it was over before she had managed to make use of it aright.

This was the strangest day of all; and formed an experience completely without parallel in any of Betty's previous excursions into unknown circles of society. In the morning they had all trooped to church, Broggers and his house party, the people from Blend Park, Esther, and Robin, and Margaret; and in the afternoon Robin and Chris had shot over the kale on the Glebe farm, Robin with his London muscles tightening up already, and a new color in his cheeks, and Betty herself in a pair of Robin's thick boots, and one of Margaret's short skirts, spending a frosty hour in the wake of the old retriever.

But it was the evening that spelt out this day as something of a climax; and Betty, looking down the long table in Broggers' dining-hall, found herself touching hands with quite a number of novel and unexpected phases of existence, though, for the most part perhaps, more or less in embryo. For with the exception of Broggers, Lomax, Esther, and an elderly cavalry colonel, the rest of the little company seemed to be as young, very nearly, as herself.

Robin and Chris were here, and Margaret, Lilah Castleton and Jack, driven over by Bob Herrick, with whom they were staying, a couple of actresses, hard-working souls, who had escaped to Whinchurch for a brief holiday; Redland, a minor poet, protégé of Broggers; and a youthful subaltern on sick leave from India. Not that he looked very sick though, Betty thought; and since he was her companion at the dinner-table, she discovered immediately that his conversation backed up his appearance.

"Bad?—Lord, no!" he told her. "Two goes of fever, don't you know. Fit as anythin' a week afterwards. Played polo at Gib on the way home. Never felt better in my life."

He surveyed her with a bronzed and cheerful countenance. Did Betty know Gib? But though Betty knew both Bath and Weston-super-Mare, she had to admit that Gibraltar lay beyond her ken.

"Ah, you're lucky," he said, stroking his mustache. "Slow place, Gib—slowest place on earth almost. 'Tis really. Where are you stayin'?"

"With Mrs. Rivers," said Betty, "over at Blend." He nodded.

"She's rippin', isn't she?" he said. "I like her awf'ly, you know. Knew the old colonel. He was a

ripper too." He swallowed some soup, and looked at her out of the corner of his eye.

"Were you at the Hambledons' dance last night?" he inquired. "Awful scrum, you know—might easily have missed seein' you there."

He implied politely that otherwise the question could never have been asked; but Betty shook her head.

"Pity," he said. "Rippin' fine dance. All so well done, you know. Of course you'll be at the Park on New Year's Eve?"

But Betty had to shake her head again.

"I don't dance," she said.

He looked at her a little helplessly.

"Well, it is rather a bore sometimes," he agreed. "An', of course, if one's really keen, say, on cards—*really* keen on 'em, don't you know—there's not much time for anythin' else."

Betty opened her mouth a little, dimly aware that she had read about situations like the present, though never until now had she been called upon to face one. She had even heard of conversions at the dinner-table. But just at the moment a general wave of laughter rippled down towards them, and her companion leaned forward to learn the joke. Up at the other end of the table Broggers and the colonel had been capping one another's stories; and she could see Chris and Robin leaning back in their chairs, laughing helplessly. Then the conversation broke up again into its different channels, shifting currents of sound in which echoes of art and war, stories from theater and studio were eddying about her ears.

Sitting in a momentary isolation she found herself still more than half confused by it all, until suddenly

glancing once more up the table, something—less pain, perhaps, than some unaccountable presage of it—drove everything else from her mind. And yet of course there was nothing really odd in the matter; only somehow the picture that was hurting her had never occurred to her as possible—Robin's fingers (so brown they were, too, against the shining tablecloth) lying idly about the slender stem of a wineglass, whose bowl, filled with—champagne, was it?—shone white and gold in the shaded candlelight. Was it Robin's habit to drink wine, then? Or was this some sudden evidence, some straw, as it were, to show whither his life was drifting as a result of this last two months in the flat at Bayswater? She glanced half reproachfully at Chris, lounging genially a little higher up the table. Or had Robin's conscience yielded perhaps on this point, for the first time and in spite of itself, to the spirit of the evening—to this reckless, festal spirit over which Broggers was presiding, and which had been let loose here by nothing less dubious than a Latin grace of remarkable brevity?

It was only a little thing; and yet because of it, she found herself studying him with new eyes, his leisurely attitude, his unquestioning at-homeness in what, as every instinct told her (and should surely have told him), was at least a dangerous atmosphere. Even in his smile towards her, slanting down the table, she seemed to discern a new quality, seemed dimly to apprehend another Robin—a Robin unknown to her and remote from her, remote by very much more than this six feet or so of linen and silver—as though something intangible, something born of all these other strange and mingled interests, had somehow crept between them; something to which

she could not give a name, but which was quite real, and very desperately strong, that was even a betrayal almost of the old life.

He was laughing across the table now with Jack Castleton, whom she remembered childishly as an inmate of her father's house, and saw here with a sudden throb of misgiving. He had left it, she believed, under some sort of a cloud, for which he had never expressed repentance, and whose nature might be only too easily accounted for by his profession of sculpture. She looked at him a little more attentively, realizing that he was, at any rate, the handsomest, perhaps the only strictly handsome, man in the room. And though he was pleasantly handsome, and his wife both gay and pretty, without creating an undue impression of empty frivolity, yet she felt now a quick desire to go to Robin, to put her arms about him, lest this something, she knew not what, represented in these feasting people, should sever him from her heart. And since she might not do this, she could only pray to God to have him in His keeping.

"I say," said her companion, "you're not feelin' seedy, are you?"

There was no formal ending to this meal. It just dallied on into the late hours. For Broggers hated cards, and loved talk; so that the little groups arranged and rearranged themselves, while coffee was brought in, and presently whisky; and nobody must object to the aroma of Broggers' best cigars. Robin came over to her, holding his coffee in one hand, and a liqueur in the other, and a cigarette between his lips.

"I say, isn't it all jolly, and isn't it a change?" he said.

He didn't mean anything rude, but Betty winced a little, as though carelessly he had included not only the Highbury high teas, but her whole scheme of life, and even herself, in his easy contrast. And yet a little later she was emphasizing it herself, when Lomax, crossing the room, came and sat down beside her.

"Let me crack you some walnuts," he said, "while you tell me how you're enjoying yourself."

He reached out a long arm for the nearest pair of crackers.

"I seem to have seen so little of you," he went on, "and you're engaged to marry one of my oldest friends, you know."

His eyes seemed good, thought Betty—seemed good, and something more, something that invited confidence, though she could never quite forget, of course, those historical proclivities of his that Peter had so justly censured.

"Oh!" she said, halting for a moment, half-way between confession and reserve, "it's all so—so different."

"Meaning Hoxton?" suggested Lomax, thinking, however, less of Hoxton than Highbury.

Betty nodded, and he followed her glance, still troubled, as it traveled round the big room.

"It's another side of the picture, isn't it?" he continued. "But it's rather a jolly one, don't you think?"

He pushed the plate of walnuts towards her.

"How did you get on with your subaltern?" he inquired.

"Not very well, I'm afraid," said Betty.

"Ah," he said, "didn't hit on each other's particular hobbies, I suppose?"

"Has he got any?" wondered Betty.

The youth in question was chatting to the colonel now, the two of them apparently engrossed.

"Well," reflected Lomax, "signaling's one of them, I believe. He's invented a new modification of the heliograph."

Betty looked at him a little dubiously, and Lomax laughed.

"You wouldn't have thought it possible, eh?"

"Is he clever, then?"

"Quite—in his own line, you know. It's only a small thing, I fancy. But it's possible to conceive the fate of a campaign turning upon it; and if a campaign, why not an empire? One never knows."

He was watching her rather seriously.

"And in its way—I suppose that's as worth doing as most things," he said.

But Betty did not reply, and the poet, leaning back across the corner of the table, asked politely for the walnuts, and changed the current of their talk.

"He's done some good work, too," commented Lomax.

"Work?" echoed Betty. "I thought he wrote verses."

Lomax laughed.

"Have you read any of them?" he asked her.

But Betty shook her head.

"His things appear in a good many of the journals. But perhaps you aren't fond of poetry?"

"Not very," she confessed; "and besides I have such little time for reading. There's—there's so much to be *done*, isn't there?"

"Ever so much," he agreed, and next minute she found herself describing to him the whole busy routine of her life.

"And it doesn't leave much room for poetry," she smiled.

"And yet it contrives to turn up in the strangest corners," mused Lomax, "and, oddly enough, I came across some of that fellow's verses only this afternoon—stuck up on a cottage wall in the farthest corner of my parish. Heaven only knows how they got there. But the old lady who lives there assured me that she read them many times a day, that they had suggested quite a new line of thought to her, and—well, comforted her, too. She's having a pretty rough time just now. He'd struck some new chord that she understood, I suppose—something that the rest of us had never discovered."

He smiled.

"I haven't told him about it," he added presently, "because he's conceited enough already."

Betty was silent for a moment as they sat there, a little apart, both of them with their eyes now upon the rest of the company.

"I think we are all going different ways here tonight," said Lomax presently; and then, turning to her abruptly—

"Which is Robin's going to be?" he asked.

"Robin's?" At first Betty did not quite understand his meaning.

"You'll have a good deal to do with it, you know," he nodded; and then realized too late that he had just spoken the word too much. For now Betty saw, or thought she saw, whence had sprung the whole trend of their conversation, and to what end

it had been destined—that she had been, as it were, for Robin's sake, subjected to some sort of cross-examination, gentle enough, though perhaps as persistent as was consonant with good manners. And, watching her, Lomax knew that he had been discovered—knew, too, with a certain chagrin, that he must have been clumsy in his questioning. But yet it had been worth while, because now, as she looked him in the face, half smiling, he caught it at last—the light in this girl's eyes for which he had been searching all the evening. Now he could see for himself what it was that had led Robin to her feet, that had revealed to his new-found faculty for worship the angel whom he believed to be the woman of his heart.

"Robin's way?" repeated Betty, and the look in her eyes robbed the words that followed at once of incongruity and offense. "Oh, the—the narrow one, I hope."

"Ah," he said, "but which?"

Which? Betty's gaze dropped involuntarily to his cloth, the badge of his profession, and returned incredulously to his questioning eyes.

He tilted the nut-crackers towards the bronze-cheeked subaltern.

"His was a narrow way—no dancing, or bridge, and only just enough polo to keep him fit for a good many months, while he was working out his problem—and Redland, to have been able to make that poem—all the ways of achievement are narrow."

"But I meant," interrupted Betty, "I meant the way to God. There's only one way to God."

He looked at her meditatively.

"Do you think so?" he asked at last. "And yet there were a good many gates to the holy city—

the city of John's dream—sixteen, weren't there? I suppose the same path can't have led to them all?"

Betty didn't quite follow, but she was glad that he had struck this note, even if next moment it was to be genially obliterated at the hand of Broggers.

He shook his finger at her.

"Ah, my dear Betty," he said, "I've got a very, very serious charge to make against you—a tremendous charge; in fact, almost a capital one."

"What's that?" wondered Betty.

He held out a plump wrist.

"Feel it," he said to her, "just feel it."

Her fingers encircled it with some hesitation.

"Well?" she smiled.

"The pulse," he explained, adjusting her fingertips to his radial artery.

"It seems all right," she said.

"Jibs a bit, doesn't it?" he inquired.

Betty was getting a little bewildered.

"I don't think so," she said.

He shook his head solemnly.

"Then it's merely on account of my remarkable constitution," he assured her. "Because that tract of yours"—Betty felt the color flowing up to her cheeks—"that tract of yours very nearly did for me, as near as——" He waved his hand, indicating something too close for any ordinary metaphor, and told her of his interview with Doctor Mulvaney. "But I've forgiven you," he concluded magnanimously. "It's Christmas Day; and I still live, though damaged, my dear, damaged. And I forgive you."

"But," stammered Betty, "I've known personally of several cases in which it has been the means of—of——"

Broggers took her arm.

"Then you must put me down on the opposite side of the balance," he said; "and now I'm going to show you one or two of my pet corners."

And, reviewing the evening later, this was the only show of battle that she had been able to make—a show so little notable that Margaret, watching her for a moment from across the room, smiled, and said to Robin—

"Broggers and Betty are getting as pally as anything,"—an observation which may have been lacking in literary polish, but which seemed, at a distance, to be at any rate truthful.

Robin concurred warmly.

"And isn't she looking jolly, too, in that creamy, whity blouse thing?"

Margaret laughed.

"Quite nice," she said.

Robin turned to her slowly.

"Funny thing," he said, "I've only just thought of it. But I expect she's feeling just about like I felt at my first meal with the Wings."

"Was it very awful?" asked Margaret.

But time and intervening circumstances had already spread a kindly veil over this particular memory.

"Oh, no," he said. "No—a bit strange, of course."

"Tell me," he said then, "what—what do you think of her, Margaret?"

She looked at him seriously.

"I think you're jolly lucky," she said—"jolly lucky."

Robin nodded.

"I thought you'd say that," he observed.

Margaret remembered something.

"And, oh, by the way, I—I meant to tell you," she said, "I happened to find something the other day in—in our old greenhouse."

"What was that?" asked Robin absently, with his eyes still examining Betty.

"Your man," she said. "Don't you remember? I'm going to give it her for a Christmas present. I left it at your house this evening."

Robin's glance came slowly back to her.

"That old thing," he said. "How funny! I should think it looks pretty rotten, doesn't it?"

"Oh, not bad," said Margaret.

"D'you know," said Robin quickly, "I've been going in for it again lately—for drawing, that is—just a bit. Old Jack persuaded me. And now I'm with Chris it seems a bit easier to—to work things, you know. So I'm having lessons."

"Oh," said Margaret, "how jolly! You oughtn't ever to have stopped, you know. Isn't Betty pleased?"

He lowered his voice.

"Look here," he said. "You mustn't say a word to her. It's a dead secret. I'm not going to tell her anything about it, till I've—till I've done something decent, if I ever do. Then I'll show it to her."

Margaret's eyes were shining.

"What a ripping idea," she said; "only, she's sure to find out, isn't she?"

"I don't see why she should," said Robin; "you won't tell anybody, will you?"

"Not a soul," she vowed.

"Honestly, truly?"

"Dying oath," said Margaret.

And it was this relic of the dust (if Margaret must

be strictly believed) that greeted their eyes from the mantelpiece, when presently, long after midnight, Betty and Robin stood alone for a moment in the little parlor at Blend.

"Rum thing," said Robin, "that it's never got broken. I made it ever so long ago."

"How interesting," said Betty.

Poor Betty! all manner of tumultuous thoughts were gathered in her mind just now, warnings, exhortations, prayers even, aching to be spoken. But somehow the words to fit them would not be summoned, and Robin was looking very sleepy above his evening collar. Thus it was, that taking both him and herself by surprise (could it indeed have been the sign, even in herself, of some incipient, moral weakening?), she found her hands upon his shoulders and her lips lifted up to be kissed; while she said—

"Tell me you still love me, Robin."

After which there was, of course, no more thinking about the figure on the mantelpiece, left there in the dark, when at last they went up to bed.

Nevertheless, next morning the sunshine would find him again unmoved—unmoved, and shaking an impudent fist, the braggart, over these years that he had conquered.

CHAPTER XIII

WHICH DISCOURSES UPON ART, AND DISCOVERS A CYNIC

A CERTAIN delicacy had always forbidden Betty to inquire into the exact circumstances of Jack Castleton's departure from her father's ménage; and even now, upon her return to town, when she had become, for the first time, disquietingly aware of his neighborhood to Robin, with all its possible significance, she shrank from questioning either Peter or her father. Bygones must be bygones; and after all, it was less Jack himself that she feared than the stream of acquaintances that flowed so freely through his open portals—a catholic and generally ill-dressed community, of whom she had seen a little, and guessed rather more.

For Jack's marriage had interfered in a surprisingly small degree with the company that he kept, though there had been a bad moment or two for the latter, while the wedding was yet an event of the future. There had even, indeed, been one or two disinterested souls who had approached him in a fine spirit of instructed (and instructing) altruism, offering their advice freely, and raising certain valuable points for his consideration.

Had he realized, for instance, the extremely radical nature of this step that he proposed to take? It seemed doubtful; though, of course, they would be the last to grudge him such material prosperity as

had accrued from a Chantrey purchase, and the popular success of a recent public statue; or to suggest that he was not financially justified. But what about those ingrained habits of his less secure youth, of his artistic temperament? For it might be all very well for him to deny the possession of any other than a phlegmatic and uniformly cheerful disposition that knew none of those moods, whims, heights, valleys, and other disconcerting experiences that constitute the traditional mental heritage of the artist. But there wasn't the least doubt about his perfectly chaotic untidiness. And would any self-respecting female being, they suggested, consent to dwell in peace with a person who ate merely when he listed, slept when he was sleepy, dropped any article whatsoever in the exact portion of this globe where it had for the moment ceased to be useful to him, and lit his pipe with unanswered correspondence? Would she—nay, could she—reasonably be expected to?

Poor baffled advisers! as if Jack couldn't see through their hollow wisdom to the envy, hatred, and all manner of selfish uncharitableness that lay beneath it. He might just as well have spared himself the trouble of defending his position, only perhaps it would have been a little unkind. So they must know that such a Love as had miraculously risen up between Lilah and himself was capable of even so great a triumph as this—a declaration that, in spite of its sentimentality, brought them almost immediately to their real grievance.

For between two rooms off the King's Road and a well-appointed ground-floor suite in Bayswater, with a sky-lit studio built out behind, there is a great gulf fixed, upon the hither side of which he would leave

them for ever. And though this might be the natural way of all successful flesh, yet they had scarcely expected it of him. It was vain, too, to protest that there was really no gulf at all, that the distance could be walked in half an hour, or bussed for twopence. The others had said the same, before the waters of matrimony and riches had rolled behind them. And everybody knew what had become of them, or might glean the information from the fashionable columns of the daily papers.

But even the most universal of rules must have its exceptions; and, in spite of these dismal precedents, Jack's Bayswater portals remained very nearly as open as those in Glebe Gardens had been. For, luckily, his methods of work did not include solitude as a necessary adjunct to production, and the maelstrom of talk, gossip, vituperation, anecdote, and sentiment that more often than not found an arena in his studio, affected him as little as wind, or sun, or a shower of rain on his skylight.

Sometimes the tide would swell; and, even as Betty feared, the flat above would be similarly invaded—Robin, and Chris, and sundry well-dressed young men from Cambridge and the hospitals, being thus surrounded with the evidences of a careless and ardent existence, that recked nothing of orange pekoe, or leucocytes, and held pot-hats to be anathema.

"Poor dears!" said Lilah to Margaret, who had been spending a few days with her, early in the new year. "They come from such *uncomfortable* places, and they're *so* hungry—that one can't grudge—only there *are* rather a lot of them sometimes. But tell me all about your visit to the Wings, my dear."

Margaret sat down by the fire, with her toes on the fender, and sipped her tea.

"Well," she said, "there isn't very much to tell. Mr. Wing was out; but Miss Wing was in, and a son called Peter. Oh, and Betty, of course."

"Poor Betty!" said Lilah. "She came here once, you know, a few weeks ago. I wanted to be kind to her for Robin's sake. But I'm afraid that we all rather frightened her."

"I shouldn't have thought she was easily frightened," laughed Margaret, remembering Betty's unflinching eyes and her clear, decided voice.

"Well, shocked then, or distressed, or something. Billy Thomas was here, you see, with his banjo, and Judy was singing nigger songs to it in French. You can imagine the row. And then Tommy Twigg came in for his cake and Jack brought in his model to tea, and Chris came down to try and keep order. Anyway, I'm afraid she wasn't very happy."

Margaret's brow wrinkled a little.

"Oh, I know," she said. "I can see, at least I think I can see, just what she felt. And I'm sure it was only—it was mostly on——"

She stopped suddenly.

"On account of Robin?" concluded Lilah sagely. "Maybe it was. I suppose she's afraid of his drifting into bad ways—or, well, into loose ones—or, anyway, just drifting. Whereas——"

Margaret was laughing now.

"I shouldn't wonder if that's just what she'd like to know. Whereas what?"

Lilah nodded impressively.

"Whereas he's merely growing," she explained. "And yet I don't know, though. He is altering.

He's rather easily influenced, I'm sure. But he's good at heart."

"Oh, yes."

"Genuinely good, I mean. But, of course—how *stupid* of me. Why didn't you stop me? You ought to know him ever so much better than I do. Why, you know, I really thought you were going to marry him."

"You *didn't*?"

"I did, honor bright."

"Well, it was jolly silly of you. We—we've known one another all our lives."

"I don't see what that proves."

"People like that never get married, you know."

"Oh, don't they?"

"Only in stories."

Lilah scoffed.

"Well, isn't this a story? It would be if any one bothered to write it down, anyway. Everything's a story. That's what the journalists say, and they ought to know. They tell enough. But Robin's a good boy, and he's a genius, too."

"A what?" gasped Margaret.

"Well, extraordinarily promising, anyhow," said Lilah. "At least, Jack says so—and so does Lesseps."

"Who's Lesseps?"

"Old Lesseps? He's the best drawing-master in London. Jack swears by him. That's why he made Robin go there. And Lesseps says he's never had anybody so good for years."

"Oh!" said Margaret, "I'm so glad. It was such a pity. I knew it all along. How ripping!"

"That's the advantage of talking to you," said

Lilah. "You're so intelligible. Now, don't get violent. I'm not so young as I was, you know."

"And Mr. Lesseps really said that?"

Lilah nodded.

"Thinks he could go any distance, if only—well, if he were *keener*, you know."

"Keen?" puzzled Margaret. "I should have thought he would have been most awfully keen."

"Well, he doesn't seem to be. He doesn't let himself go. That's what Lesseps says. And the technique seems to come to him so easily that if he did——"

"Poor boy! I don't expect he feels a bit like working at all, at the end of a long day in that awful, grimy office."

"Oh!" said Lilah briskly, "I don't think it's a question of physical fatigue. Anyway, he's looking oceans fitter since he came to live with Chris—*oceans*."

Margaret laughed.

"That's because Chris is such a frightful old epicure. He always was, you know. And he said he meant to feed Robin up. Feeding Robin—it sounds quite pathetic and Sunday-schooly, doesn't it?"

But this was the last day of Margaret's week in town, and now, for the second time, the parlormaid was knocking at the door.

"Miss Lomax's cab, m'm," she announced; "and please he's been waiting ten minutes, already."

This would have been about the last week in February, when Robin had already been four months with Chris; four months of as placidly happy a nature as any that he could remember. And this was strange too, considering that he had approached this new phase of life in no very certain frame of mind, and,

indeed, with considerable misgivings. Even to himself (and much more so to the Wings) the step had seemed a serious one. For one must remember that, though one might still perforce be *in* the world, one was no longer *of* it, and could not make too free with it, with moral impunity. And, while Chris himself, paying a brief visit to Highbury, had created a not unfavorable impression, both Robin and the Wings had foreseen hard fighting upon many a future battleground.

"I wouldn't say no, my boy," said Mr. Wing, "and nor would any of us, would we, Betty? And your own mother tells me that she welcomes the arrangement. But it will be a test, Robin, and a grave one. Pray about it well before you decide. Because I think we are never called upon to expose ourselves to unnecessary temptations. But, if you go, and mind it is not for me to say yes or no in this matter, Stand Fast. And your witness won't be in vain,"—well-chosen words that hardly lessened, however, the difficulties with which the question was harassed.

So Betty and he had talked the matter over, and even prayed about it, according to Mr. Wing's suggestion, though with less definite enlightenment perhaps than they would have welcomed. After all, too, there was no denying the fact that Chris himself would seem to be quite the most natural companion for Robin's bachelor days, and had shown besides a very pretty taste in the decoration and arrangement of his flat—an æsthetic consideration that proved to be not without importance in the final settlement of the problem.

For somewhere, very deep down no doubt, but still somewhere, the confession was reluctantly assert-

ing itself in Robin's heart that he was growing just a little bit tired of the Wing linoleum. Not that love was unable to triumph over linoleum—he could never mean that; and his evenings with Betty would always shine out above all the other evenings in the week. But to live with—he hadn't been in his new quarters for a week before linoleum lay written for ever in his private Index Expurgatorius.

Nor did the ethical question prove to be as difficult as everybody had supposed. For though, out of the heterogeneous total of Chris' acquaintances, there was none perhaps that sounded the clear note as the Wings would sound it, there were frequently times when the deeper issues of life would thrust themselves up in the course of idle conversation, to be argued reverently enough, if from a hundred new and surprising stand-points. Religion, too, was neither barred from these discussions nor even scoffed at, however profoundly this or that form of its theological presentment might be advocated or disowned; and Robin's views, becoming known, were at any rate respected. Indeed, it would be Judy, perhaps, who would constitute herself the unkindest of his critics, as on this winter evening that had witnessed Margaret's departing cab wheels on their way to Paddington.

It was the hour between dinner and coffee, and they were sitting, the three of them, in the little parlor, Chris and Robin deep in armchairs on either side of the fireplace, the former with his knees drawn up, scribbling in a sketch-book; and Judy between them on the table, her eyes upon the dancing flames and a cigarette between her lips.

"I hate your Puritans," she said, "and I hate their Puritanism. They're the snobs of the religious world,

that's what they are, the snobs of it. Oh, I dare say they've got their good points. So has snobbery. It recognizes the value of good breeding; and then proceeds to parody it so abominably that a lot of poor ordinary folks say 'Down with the aristocrats,' and I don't blame them."

She nodded emphatically.

"And that's what the Puritans do for religion," she concluded, "and I hate them."

Chris lolled over in his chair.

"All wight," he said, "but you needn't get so shirty about it, because—because you're a bit of a puwitan yourself. And you know it,"—an attack so entirely unexpected that Judy might almost have blushed if her blood vessels had been more accustomed to the exercise.

As it was, she merely rose from her seat upon the table, threw her cigarette-end into the fire, and stared haughtily at Chris.

"*Dame!*" she said, "if I thought that—if I really thought that, I should hate myself."

And then going over to the glass, she examined herself critically.

"And I believe I do," she added.

Chris groaned.

"Now we're going to hear it all over again," he said, referring seemingly to some well-thrashed topic of Judy's recent conversation.

"If you're going to be beasts," said Judy, "I shall go straight downstairs and talk to Lilah."

"But why beasts?" protested Robin, screwing up his right eye and regarding her profile with his left. "I'm not doing anything, am I?"

"There are negative beasts," said Judy. "And

if—if you were women, you'd understand. It's quite tragic, really."

"Poor old Judy!" cried Chris; "and do they all tease her, then? And tell her she's getting fat? And does she want to be comforted?"

Judy swept up her muff from the table and proceeded to depart.

"Very well, then," she observed, "I shan't tell you my news."

Chris rolled over the arm of his chair, and proceeded to insert himself between Judy and the door.

"Oh, yes, you will," he said. "Out with it, Judy."

"In half a minute," said Judy, "I shall swear."

Chris was shocked.

"Then let me go—prrr—*immédiatement*."

She stamped.

There came a sound behind them of a sheet of cartridge paper being torn from a sketch-book, and Judy looked back over her shoulder. Robin held it up for her to see, and turning back from the door she went across the room to him, and bent over it. Chris followed, peeping over her shoulder.

"By George!" he said, "he's got you, Judy—bang in the middle. It's as like as anything."

Judy put her hand under Robin's chin, and tilting it up, looked into his eyes.

"You're rather a wonderful boy, you know," she said. "You are really. Nothing out of the way, of course. You mustn't go thinking that, or you'll get conceited."

Chris reached an arm over the nodding feather in Judy's hat (this was the year of Feathers) to take

the sketch from Robin's hands, and would no doubt have succeeded in doing this had not Judy pushed him suddenly to one side, with a quite baffling violence, and fled beneath his arm towards the door.

"*Mon brave!*" she cried, "so a woman's beaten you, eh?" Whereupon, it must reluctantly be recorded, she displayed to her beholders, for an appreciable fraction of a second, the tip—the merest tip, but still, alas! the tip—of a pink and rather annoyingly triumphant tongue.

Chris, however, professed his entire disregard for this circumstance. In fact, giving vent to an audible sigh of relief, he began to scan his bookshelves with apparent affection, just as though Judy, in the doorway, had never gained a victory at all.

"Thank Heaven!" he observed piously. "I'll be able to do some weeding at last."

But when she had gone he knocked out his pipe against the fire-rails and looked seriously at Robin. The little sketch was lying on the table between them, and he nodded to it.

"That's rather good," he said, "you've come on a lot, you know."

Robin was lying back in his chair now, with his hands in his pockets.

"Yes," he admitted, "I believe I have."

Chris picked up the drawing, studied it for a minute, and laid it down again.

"I should show it to Jack," he said; but Robin laughed.

"Oh, he's seen lots of 'em," he said, "and, besides, it's not good, really, you know."

"What does old what's-his-name think about you—Lesseps?"

"He doesn't say much only, 'Peg along, my son, peg along.' And, anyway, it's not drawing exactly that I'm keen on."

"But drawing has to come first, I suppose?"

"It ought to."

"Now, supposing," said Chris tentatively, "supposing you could make yourself at this moment anything you liked, just by wishing for it, what would you be?"

Robin stared at him, frowning.

"D'you mean if I hadn't to make my living, and do other things, and so on?"

Chris nodded.

"Why, then, sculptor of course," said Robin very promptly—so much too promptly, in fact, that presently, perhaps half an hour later, when Chris had succeeded in burying himself in a treatise on Benign Tumors, he broke the silence again.

"Look here!" he said, "I was only rotting. I didn't exactly mean that. I've never thought about it. And, anyway, I know I shan't ever be a sculptor, really."

It took Chris a few seconds to gather the exact bearings of this apology. But at the end of them he shook his head sternly.

"No, you weren't," he said. "You weren't wotting; and that wasn't what I asked you."

He let the book slide down into his lap.

"Why don't you go for it?" he asked.

"Go for it—how could I?"

Chris considered for a moment.

"You got some money when you were twenty-one, didn't you?" he suggested.

"Only two hundred quid."

"Well, that would give you a bit of time in Paris or Italy or somewhere, wouldn't it?"

But Robin's reason remained firm.

"And chuck up the business?" he inquired sarcastically.

"You aren't very keen on it, are you?"

"Keen on it? Oh, I don't know. It's all right. And there are prospects, you see."

Chris closed one eye judicially.

"Wheweeas, of course," he observed, "Art's a wotten caweer."

Robin sat up.

"What?" he cried. "Rotten? Art's rotten? To take an ugly great chunk of marble, and carve out of it something that's going to make the hearts of everybody that looks at it throb and—and all that?"

"Oh, I only meant financially," explained Chris mildly. "Before you've weached the—the thwobbing stage."

But Robin was still a little warm.

"Rotten?" he repeated. "Rotten?"

"Well then, why the deuce don't you go in for it?"

"Why, because I can't, of course, because—because——"

And then they both thought of something at the same time.

"There's Betty, for instance," he said.

"Of course," said Chris slowly, "so there is. There's Betty."

And thus it was Lilah, after all, who was the first to hear Judy's tidings, exploded upon her with customary abruptness.

"I'm going to America," she said.

Lilah stared at her.

"Going where?" she asked dubiously.

"To America; New York first, and then all sorts of places, *villes* and *opolises* all over the shop."

She paused impressively.

"And all because," she went on, "because of a few chance words spoken in this very room less than six months ago. It's funny what queer little divinities shape our ends, isn't it? Because if Tommy Twigg hadn't told me I was getting fat, and if Bergstein hadn't overheard him, and if—if it hadn't been true——"

This must have been the tragedy that only a woman could fully understand.

"But I don't see what you mean," said Lilah. "I suppose I'm very stupid."

Judy looked at her thoughtfully.

"You see," she explained, "I depend upon my body more than most women, Lilah. And most women have got something else besides, talents, a profession, or a husband, who loves their souls as well, or—or babies, perhaps. And when their bodies begin to grow gradually less beautiful, they can turn to these other things, and be more or less satisfied, I suppose. But I—I've none of them, Lilah. I've only a little money that I've saved up. And it isn't enough."

Lilah was holding out her hands.

"Oh," she cried impulsively, "oh, you poor——"

But Judy cut her short.

"Good gracious!" she said, "you mustn't look like that. I'm not starving or anything. I'm not, really. And I've saved up quite enough to buy myself some bread and butter. Only I want some jam too."

At least, I shall when I'm old, and ugly, and fat, and bored, and haven't got anything to do."

"But still," puzzled Lilah. "I don't quite see what all this has got to do with me, and this room, and Tommy Twigg——"

"Ah, but that's just what I'm coming to. I want jam, and Bergstein's going to give it to me."

She made a little bow.

"You behold, my dear, la Belle—la Belle—what is it?—la Belle Aurore—contract signed, ticket taken, guaranteed to appear at *not* more than eight performances a week, for three months, at sixteen guineas a week."

"It *sounds* very prosperous," said Lilah.

"And that's only the beginning," pursued Judy. "Because, if I make a hit, I'll be able to ask what I like. And I *shall* make a hit, Lilah, I know it. And I shall save it all up and put it into Consols."

"But what are you going to do?" puzzled Lilah. "Sing, dance, play, or what?"

Judy nodded again.

"*J'y suis, j'y reste*," she observed, "I shall appear, my dear."

"You don't mean——?"

"The presentations," quoted Judy, "will be in the strictest taste, and will be confined to the exhibition of well-known pictures and statues, in some of which, as the original model—I forget the rest of it. But that's the sort of thing. That's Bergstein's idea. And Bergstein's ideas generally mean money. 'A leetle, a ver' leetle too ploomp for the stodio, ver' soon, m' dear—hey? but joost right for the limelight.'"

Lilah was silent.

"Do you like Mr. Bergstein?" she asked at last.

"Like him?" said Judy. "*Mon Dieu!* I hate him. He's a fat beast. But he's useful. And I think I've learned to take care of myself."

"Oh, yes," said Lilah. "But, all the same—it's such a new idea, isn't it? And it doesn't seem quite—quite like you, Judy."

"Why not?"

Lilah was a little nonplused.

"The stage is so different from the studio, isn't it?" she said lamely; "and there's the limelight, and—well, of course, you'll have to wear *something*—but it's not, it's hardly art, is it?"

"It's sixteen guineas a week, my dear, which is much more to the point. And, anyway, I'm not an artist. I'm a model."

Lilah was still looking a little doubtful.

"I believe you're shocked," said Judy.

"Oh, no, I don't think I am. Only it—it's an idea that wants getting used to, isn't it?"

"You'll come and see me if I appear in England, Lilah, won't you?"

Lilah laughed.

"Of course I will—that is, if Jack will take me. I suppose you won't go anywhere *too* low, will you?"

Judy reflected.

"Well," she said at last, "they'll have to make it worth my while, if I do."

"D'you know," said Lilah, "I sometimes think that money's the only thing you really care about."

"So it is," said Judy promptly, "or very nearly. And it would be a very good thing if some people thought more of it, too—Tommy Twigg, for instance. You know he's going to get married next month, I suppose?"

Lilah nodded.

"And I've never seen anybody so much improved, by getting engaged, in such a short time before. He's become quite a dear, and so humble."

"Well, I don't know about that," said Judy. "He's nearly as hard up as he can be. If it weren't for the babies—but I suppose he wouldn't have attempted it without the babies. Has she any money?"

"Norah? Oh, no, poor thing! Not a penny, and no relations, and they're going to live in the studio."

Now in a world that has already contained such various and significant nonentities as the Geese that saved the Capitol, the Spider that paved the way to Bannockburn, and the gentleman from Porlock, who shut away from us, for ever, the vision of Kubla Khan—in such a world, it would be the dullest of truisms to emphasize the possible importance of the least noticeable occurrence, even if Judy had not already made a brief remark upon this subject. But it *was* strange, as Lilah now observed, that two such comparatively outstanding events as Judy's emigration to America, and Tommy Twigg's marriage with Norah Carstairs, should both have traced their ancestry to a selfsame afternoon in this particular apartment. And yet, if both Tommy and Judy were to be believed, this was indeed the case.

For to Tommy, walking home towards his studio in Hammersmith (and incidentally saving a bus fare), there had occurred suddenly the idea of fastening upon paper, and possibly canvas, his impressions of the Castleton child. And while, as it will perhaps be remembered, these were hardly pleasing, yet now in this puling guise, and by an inspired Flash, it seemed

to him that he beheld the great total sum of all budding Humanity, ugly and pink, and destitute of any particle of refinement (dribbling even—a detestable habit).

It was a solemn conception, and a humbling one, too, if one became retrospective; but for the moment it sent him striding over Kensington Gardens in the fervor of a new resolve, in the growing desire to proclaim something of the above to an illusioned world; to make a protest against the simpering, seraphic, soulful little angel that Popular Prejudice associated with a baby in a frame. Yes, he would do it, though all the mothers in England should shriek for his destruction. He, Tommy Twigg, would make this stand for Truth, would depict, for all the world to see, the Vulgar Automaton, the mere bundle of reflexes, the Fundamental Baby, unilluminated by an imaginary soul, and without even the smallest cloud of glory to its name.

Not a bad idea, my boy, thought Tommy, and foresaw indeed already the hard-wrung praises of Messrs. Blank, Blank, and Blank, critics, upon whom he relied very greatly and who had already called the attention of their earnest, if limited, public to the somber realism of Mr. Thomas Twigg. But *l'homme propose*—and after executing a considerable number of studies, behold two lady visitors who lean over his table and go into ecstasies, and tell him that the darlings are simply sweet.

Simply sweet? Shades of Messrs. Blank, Blank, and Blank,—sweet? Poor Tommy! it was rumored that he had not slept for at least two nights after this, and would forthwith have committed the innocents to the flames, but for the indignant interposition of the lady friends. Sweet? Good heavens!

And no more would have been heard of the pretty dears, had not Love, and a Publisher, appeared almost simultaneously upon the stage of Mr. Twigg's existence—the one in the guise of Miss Norah Carstairs, younger of the lady friends aforesaid, than whom no braver, sweeter, prettier—and the other as a producer of children's books and a popular magazine, who wanted babies, all Mr. Twigg's babies, and as many more as he liked to draw.

Alas! very few perhaps of the merely mundane majority could be expected to fathom the real bitterness of the conflict that now followed, for the prize of Mr. Twigg's artistic future,—an Armageddon in which, upon the one side, were ranged Messrs. Blank, Blank, and Blank, the acid but discerning gentlemen whose words had been as manna to his soul; and upon the other Miss Norah, who knew nothing of the Higher Realism and hated pimples, but was the bravest, sweetest, prettiest—together with the whole army of false, cherubic babies that spelt the Where-withal. Few indeed could apprehend the ultimate significance of the issues at stake, or the full anguish of his more elderly aspirations as they lay gasping under the heels of these prosaic young upstarts. Altogether it was a sorry, bloody affair, and if in the end it was only a second-rate Tommy that emerged victorious, well, that was Norah's lookout, and is merely of secondary interest to the history in hand.

“Yes,” pursued Lilah, “Tommy says that that afternoon has revolutionized his life, and so I think it has. Poor souls! they can't afford a honeymoon, so they're going to give a dinner at Pinchetti's, and I'm sure it'll run them into debt.”

Then she looked at Judy seriously.

"You don't *really* disapprove, do you?" she asked. And Judy shook her head.

"Of course I don't," she said. "I think it's the best thing Tommy's ever done. And, besides, it's taught him the proper relative positions of life, Art, and Mr. Thomas Twigg."

She grinned.

"Have you noticed, my dear," she went on, "what generally happens when Art, even with its very swaggerest A, runs up against life, wearing quite a commonplace little I?"

She spread out her arms; and in the gesture it seemed to Lilah that she included not only Tommy Twigg, as an instance in point, but also herself in relation to Mr. Bergstein and his idea. And yet, Lilah was quite certain that somewhere there was an answer that would at once justify the one and perhaps condemn the other. Only it was a little difficult to put it into words. So she said—

"You're a cynic, my dear, and here comes the coffee."

CHAPTER XIV

WHICH CAPTURES A SPARK OF THE DIVINE FIRE

"THAT'S just the worst of it," said Peter to his sister, an evening or two later than this. "It would be easier to tackle if it were only more obvious, more tangible." He smiled a little, though with reservations owing to the nature of the subject. "But it's all so very indefinite."

Betty was silent, perhaps even a little resentful, since it was Robin who was the absent cause of this brotherly homily (just as though she were not as awake as Peter to the real condition of affairs), but at the same time acknowledging the truth upon his side.

"You don't mind my mentioning it?" he asked.

"Oh, no," she said.

"You see," he proceeded—he had grown perhaps just a trifle more professional of late—"you see, Robin's very young, after all. He's three years younger than you are, and has been differently brought up. And it's so easy, isn't it, to slip back even after a genuine conversion? And mind, I'm not in the least doubting the fact of his conversion."

He held out his glass for some more milk, and Betty filled it up for him.

"I'm not the only one that's noticed it," he went on. "They've seen it both at Islington and Hoxton—just a general slackening of the—er—the spiritual

guy-ropes, so to speak. He hasn't given his testimony, for instance, at the last open-air or two, and for some little time, they tell me, it has lacked the ring about it that it first had. And twice lately he never even came to the meetings at all. Said he had previous engagements."

He looked at Betty keenly; but now, for the first time, beheld in her eyes an expression that struck him as being a little unfamiliar, as though some sensibility with which it had never occurred to him to credit her were wincing at his words.

"I'm sorry if I'm giving you pain," he added.

"Oh," she said, "about those two times—I know. He told me. He's having drawing lessons."

"Drawing lessons? But surely——"

"He's rather fond of drawing," explained Betty lamely.

Peter took a turn or two up and down the room, and glanced into the passage to make certain that the servants were well out of hearing.

"Drawing?" he repeated. "Drawing?"

Then, with a sudden flash of illumination, "I think you said that he was seeing a good deal of the Castletons," he observed, in a lower voice.

"I think he does."

"You know, I suppose, why it was that father had to get rid of young Castleton?"

Betty flushed up a little, but shook her head. Peter was drumming with his finger-nails upon the top of the gas-stove.

"Of course," he said, "you wouldn't remember him much. But I do very well, though I was only a boy at the time. He was never a true Christian, but father held on to him both for his own sake and his

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father's. His father was in the Indian army, and his mother was dead, you know. Well, father found out at last that he was in the habit of spending his evenings at an Art School, where they had live models, men *and*—you understand? Even as a small boy, I believe, father had found some such er—sensual tendencies in him. Of course he said it was necessary for his Art's sake, and no doubt, in a sense, that may have been the case. But from a Christian point of view—well, you see, it was rather difficult for father to keep any one like that in the house."

He paused.

"I thought I'd better tell you," he said, "now that Robin is perhaps rather thrown with them. Of course, when he went there we none of us knew that Castleton and his wife would be living so close to him."

Betty was still rather red, and now Peter patted her arm.

"Well, cheer up!" he said; "after all, humanly speaking, nobody has more influence upon him than you. And probably the matter hasn't gone very far. Only one can't be too careful, can one, especially if he's being attracted by Art?"

"Eh?" said Mr. Wing, coming into the little supper-room with his sister. "Art? Who's being attracted by Art?"

But with a tact for which Betty could not but be grateful, Peter abstained, at any rate for the moment, from drawing Robin into a general discussion; and, instead, the family surveyed its position with regard to the wider question.

"By those who are gifted," said Mr. Wing, "I think there's very much that can be done for the Kingdom in drawing and painting, very much indeed.

There's Holbein's 'Light of the World,' for instance, that's always so useful as an illustration for addresses. You used it yourself only last week, Peter."

"I know," laughed Peter; "but you might give the poor man his full name, father,—Holbein Hunt, not plain Holbein, or Holman is it? One of them anyway."

Mr. Wing joined heartily in the laugh against himself, but soon became serious again.

"And there are others," he went on, "other pictures that must have had a very real influence for good. So many people can be reached through the eye."

"And there's the magic lantern," said Miss Wing.

"So there is, and the cinematograph. I believe there are great possibilities in front of the cinematograph—Bible scenes and so on. But all the same I agree with you, Peter, that for anybody who has found God,"—he looked round his little circle—"who knows Him as we know Him, a life given wholly to Art must always be a second-best one."

"Ah!" said Peter eagerly, "but is there such a thing as a second-best life—in the deliberate sense, I mean? Wouldn't such a life tend to become more and more of a falling away from the Highest?"

"But surely," said Betty, "a boy, a man I mean, can be an artist *and* a Christian?"

Her father looked at her thoughtfully, and in his eyes there would seem to have arisen some memory of this incident that Peter had described to her.

"To a certain extent," he said slowly, "and within limitations; but *only* to a certain extent."

A few minutes later, as they were separating upon the first landing to go to bed, Peter questioned his sister once more.

"That woman," he said suddenly, "with whom you

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once told me Robin had struck up an acquaintance before his conversion, that—er—model—he doesn't see her now, I suppose?"

"Very rarely, I think," said Betty, "and he tells me that she's going on the stage in a few weeks' time."

"As an actress?"

"N—no, as a—a sort of statue, I believe."

A *what?* Peter did not utter the words, but they were written so entirely unmistakably upon his face that for a second time this evening Betty found herself coloring up, an unusual experience, as though, in a sense, both Robin and herself had been contaminated also.

"Of course Robin doesn't," she stammered—"Robin dislikes it very much."

But Peter said nothing, and if his lips opened a little to propound another question, they closed again, leaving it unasked. His face above the candle-flame shone out very clear and firm, and his eyes were fixed and bright. For half a second they looked straight into hers; and then, kissing her good-night, he closed his bedroom door.

From another point of view Lilah too was finding it difficult to explain in words; but there it was—the feeling that Judy was somehow on the brink of a false step, of a step, at any rate, that was "unlike her," as Lilah complained. And presently when the news had gone round Lilah found that she was by no means alone in this attitude of doubt and dislike. Even Jack, most easy-going of mortals, expressed himself as being sorry that she was accepting Bergstein's offer, although he admitted cheerfully that it might very likely turn up trumps.

"And after all there seems no really good reason why the poor girl shouldn't sit on the stage and become rich, as long as she's decent."

"Oh, but it isn't that exactly," said Lilah; "and there are lots of models, who could do it—well, without hurting their friends. But Judy seems different, somehow."

"That's the best of women," said Jack oracularly. "They're so magnificently illogical."

Lilah looked a little cross.

"And to think of being stared at by rows and rows of those *horrible* men that one always sees at music halls—fat men with roly chins, and fishy eyes with yellow whites to them, and big cigars. Ugh! it makes me shiver."

But then Lilah would often talk like this, and on such occasions Jack would usually proceed to climb up into his private pulpit.

"I won't have it, my dear," he would tell her. "It's entirely due to an unnecessary and completely sentimental anthropomorphism."

Sometimes he would repeat this last phrase (a quite accidental inspiration) more than once; and, for the first time or two, at any rate, Lilah had been a little frightened by it.

"Oh, Jack, it's—it's not really as bad as that, is it?"

"Every bit," he would tell her sternly. "You read into the world at large your own particular feelings at any given moment, and—well, you mustn't, you know,"—whereupon Lilah would probably want to be kissed, and so the matter would drop.

And to-night Jack had not the least intention of being tied up into any ethical knots on Judy's account.

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"You can tie one in my bow, my dear, instead," he informed her, holding up his chin; "or we shall be late for Tommy's dinner,"—from all of which it will be seen that Bergstein's visit to Jack's studio was to be regarded rather as the accidental contact of two different worlds than an evidence of any existing familiarity between the Variety Stage and this particular little circle of society.

It was because of this, no doubt, that Judy's new scheme became something of an adventure into the unknown, and an adventure that was regarded, though without the least reflection upon her proposed destination, perhaps a little askance.

In any case, it seemed to emphasize the distinction that hitherto had scarcely existed between the professional model and the personal friend. It was almost as if she were deliberately cutting herself off from them; and though it was obviously useless to argue with her on the matter, there was a certain uneasy note in her self-justification that could not quite escape notice. She was very positive about it, all the same.

"It's not as if I shall damage anybody's morals," she said to Bob Herrick, as they turned up the little street to Pinchetti's. "Although I don't see what that's got to do with me, anyway."

But Bob was not gifted with the arts of controversy, and blindly ignored her challenge.

"It's a rotten bad idea all the same," he said, "and I don't like it. You're not really hard up. And, if you were, you know we——"

Judy's eyes blazed suddenly wrathful.

"Well?" she said.

"Oh, dash it all!" said Bob. "You needn't look like that, you know. It's a bad notion, that's all."

"But why?" said Judy impatiently. "Tell me why."

Bob frowned a little.

"Because of lots of things," he said at last. "Do you think the fellows over there, or here either, when you come back, will go to look at you merely to see somebody's idea of Atalanta or Aphrodite?"

Judy was rather red.

"I don't know," she said. "I can't ask them why they come, can I? And if I could, I'm not responsible for their motives, am I?"

"But you propose to trade on them."

"I don't; Bergstein does, perhaps. I shan't show them anything wicked."

"It's a rotten bad idea anyway," repeated Bob doggedly.

Judy was really a trifle piqued.

"Well, I think it's a very fine one," she said.

"It'll pay, of course, if that's what you mean."

"Well, isn't that the chief thing?"

Bob shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, I don't know. Is it? Perhaps it is."

They were at the door now, behind which stood a little French waiter, bowing and scraping to welcome them in. Judy paused on the step.

"I'll tell you what *is* funny, though," she said, "and that's the idea of you preaching morals to me."

And then, before Bob could get his tongue round a suitable reply, a hansom pulled up with a clatter of sprawling hoofs, and launched into their arms Robin and Chris, whose ideas of Judy's future were perhaps just as prejudiced as Bob's, only this was not the moment for airing them.

Behind them, in another cab, came Lilah on Jack's

knee, with Broggers for a third, grumbling audibly at the probable effects of a Pinchetti dinner upon a middle-aged digestion; while, before these three had well alighted, behold the neatest of broughams rolling up behind a chestnut mare—an unfamiliar spectacle in this little side-street of Soho, and one that attracted some passing attention. The coachman drew up, and the grizzled but well-groomed occupant, who now made his appearance, might much more easily have passed for a Brook Street physician than the other kind of celebrity that he really was.

“See that,” said an ardent young student to a companion on the pavement, “that’s old Templar, the R.A.—Sir Leonard Templar. Safe to be president, if he lives. Knighted last year, you know, and all that. Wonder who he’s dining with.”

And this was Tommy, in whom, though a very distant cousin, he had always taken an unexpected interest, without ever evincing any great enthusiasm for his art.

“He wouldn’t, of course,” Tommy used to say, in his superior days. “He’s too blooming well stuck in his own groove;” while, if any one said, “Good groove to be stuck in,” Tommy would shake his head significantly.

To-night, at any rate, he had so far shifted himself from it as to descend from his brougham at Pinchetti’s, and begin forthwith to make himself as agreeable as possible to Tommy and his wife and their assembling guests.

These were about fifteen in all, with perhaps a somewhat overwhelming proportion of men; but what did that matter when among the women were Lilah and Judy and Norah? Why, nothing at all, unless the fact

that two of these were so hopelessly outshone should contrive to damage their tempers. For even Tommy, who ought to know, had never seen Norah quite so radiant as she appeared to-night—the bride at his right hand, and by far the prettiest woman in the room, not forgetting Judy.

For though of course Norah could not really hold a candle to Judy in respect either of contour or feature or clearness of coloring, yet there was something in her face—a sort of light, Tommy thought—that Judy had either missed altogether, or managed somewhere, at any rate, to have left behind her. Judy's beauty was an asset too, while Norah's was only an accompaniment, a subtle difference, perhaps, but a real one notwithstanding; and for Tommy there were no memories of a *Fille à la Porte* to cast their glamor upon to-night,—while to crown the whole, and cast to the four winds all other possible dispute, here was Youth, too, upon Norah's side—Youth, the turncoat, for all that Judy's stormier years had been never so lightly borne. In his arms she was uplifted. She was on the wave's crest—the crest of this strange, tremulous, triumphant occasion that was writing all manner of unforeseen expressions upon her blushing countenance.

Tommy could quite well have studied nothing else for the next three or four hours, if only his duties as host had permitted; whereas, as matters stood, even Robin, youngest of the party, would have a better opportunity of doing this than he—a trivial circumstance, but not to be despised. For Pinchetti or his *maître d'hôtel* (or Destiny) had so arranged the dinner-table that to Robin, from his seat at the further end of it, Tommy's bride appeared very appropriately framed in a setting of candlelight and roses; while

Tommy himself (or again Destiny) suggested presently that the menu cards should be circulated for signatures.

This move took place somewhere about ten o'clock, when the toasts and speeches were well under weigh, and Robin was perhaps both a little excited and a trifle inattentive. In any case, playing with his pencil, and discovering the last card passed on to him to be Tommy's own, he found himself dotting down upon its other side a sudden impression of Norah—a complimentary idea that began to grow upon him with every second.

He drew a line or two, and effaced them with some breadcrumbs; and then, looking up, caught sight again of Norah's face, half turned from him in its glowing setting, as she listened with smiling lips to one of Sir Leonard's anecdotes. His neighbors on either side were busy for the moment, and pushing forward his plate of walnut shells he bent down over the ivory card.

And it came. For the first time in his life it came—something beautiful, and complete, and right, absolutely right—nose, lips, eyes, lights and shadows, poise, expression, all of it. His picture of Judy last week had been crudeness itself beside this; everything that he had ever done lay condemned as a failure. For this was perfect—quite small of course, and only very slight, but in its own way perfect. Nobody in the room could have bettered it—could have captured more entirely, in these three or four tiny minutes, her spirit of the moment, the something, at once proud and humble, half-frightened but completely joyful, that shone out from her face just now. It lay there, imprisoned upon the paper, like some live creature,

throbbing to burst its bonds, as though a greater Hand than his had stooped to be its captor. Yet there it was, like the perfect stanza, the supreme chord—the only thing possible, and yet the best that could be. And at first, because it seemed so scarcely human, he found himself staring at it with something like awe, for all the consciousness that it was, indeed, the work of his own hands. For a moment it left him metaphorically breathless. Even so must the old apostles have felt when first upon their dumbness there fell the fiery gifts of language. Then he turned it over, so that it lay against the tablecloth, sheltered from two or three pairs of curious eyes; and reaching out towards his wineglass, he saw that his fingers were trembling.

He leant back in his chair trying to listen to the last words of the speech, and all the while longing to have another look at the face that was hidden from him; longing, and yet half afraid that a second glance would shatter the illusion. Because it must be an illusion. His common sense told him so. But if not, if by chance it weren't, why, then, what lay beyond? Had the apostles wondered, too?

So presently he handed the card to his neighbor, who, knowing nothing of the miracle upon its other side, passed it up the table as carelessly as though the fingers of Fate had been busy a thousand miles away. And it was old Sir Leonard who discovered it in the end, having tapped the tablecloth with it several times to emphasize some perfectly unimportant statement. He was about to hand the card to Tommy, Robin saw, when his eyes chanced upon the little drawing underneath, and he bent over it, at first with a smile, but presently with a great show of attention;

with extraordinary attention really, when one remembered how great a man he was.

Robin saw him put a question to Lilah, who shook her head but glanced inquiringly along the ring of faces. He saw them looking at it together, and then at Norah, and then back again at the drawing. Then Norah leaned forward to ask what they were looking at, and they gave it to her, Tommy bending over her arm, and Broggers, upon the other side, adjusting his spectacles.

In a moment they would all be asking who had done it, and Robin plunged, he didn't quite know why, into an irrelevant conversation with one of the Misses Twigg; but only for a moment, because in the next he had to own up to his workmanship. They had all seen it now, and most of them with the eyes of connoisseurs. And yet Robin saw that even so their eyes had found it good. But it was rotten of them all to stare at him like that, and yet it was rather decent of them, too; and especially of Sir Leonard, who presently came round and sat down beside him, asking him questions, eliciting all manner of the most surprising replies, and discovering secret aspirations, that took Robin himself far more by surprise than this elderly inquisitor.

Yes, it was marble that he was keen on—no, not color so much—form. He would love to have done this little head in marble. Of course he couldn't ever have done it. He wasn't any real good, you know. This was a sort of Fluke; something that he hadn't exactly meant. Oh, yes, he saw it was good, though. Then he wasn't an artist? No, rather not; he was a clerk in a tea business—Lime Street, in the City, you know. If he had more time, yes, that was just it—

sculpture. But, really, he was talking an awful lot of rot. And there was Broggers making the final speech and replying on behalf of Art, *in toto* and in the abstract. He was waving Robin's sketch, too, with his usual gesticulations. Why couldn't these orators wave something else? Robin wondered. And suppose he dropped it into the punch-bowl.

And yet, in spite of his preoccupation, a sentence or two of this little speech stuck fast in his mind, coupled itself even with the wonder in Broggers' right hand, and became woven into the memory of this evening's experience. For Broggers was unwontedly solemn in spite of his pomposity, and would seem now to be dealing a blow at some unworthy tradition.

"'After the feast the minstrels,'" he quoted; "and in the great world's heart that still remains the artist's proper place. But we know better, gentlemen, and we say"—he thumped the table with his fist,—“if music is still to be the metaphor, why, then, we say, ‘Before the Army the Band,’ gentlemen—‘Before the Army the Band,’”—brave words, that rang in Robin's ears, as presently, arm in arm with Chris, he found himself walking homewards down Oxford Street.

They rang in his ears like the very bugles themselves, that they suggested, of some eager, marching host; while Norah's face upon a fluttering menu card might well become its banner—all dreams, of course, so that it was hardly fair of Chris, the flatterer, even to imagine that somewhere there might be waiting a real bugle for none but Robin's lips. For here was a fire too perilous to be played with, more real, and a million times more dazzling than this poor twinkling

avenue of arc-lights that was lighting them home to Bayswater.

Even a very little of it was rather blinding; so that for a while Betty's letter that awaited him remained unopened in his hand. And, indeed, when he had read it, he realized its message only dimly. He had forgotten to keep some appointment, it seemed—to go to a meeting or something with her. But what would she say when she knew? It was odd, though, that she should have underlined the last paragraph of her letter; and now, staring at it a little stupidly, he read it a second time.

"For, oh, Robin!" she wrote, "you must promise me, *promise* me, that this love for your drawing shall never intrude between your heart and God."

At the corner of Shaftesbury Avenue, Broggers and Judy stood waiting for the bus that was to carry her home.

"I dare say we're all a little foolish," he said. "We've got into a groove, you know, that's what it is. But are you quite satisfied yourself, my dear, about this—this new project of yours?"

Judy was a trifle impatient.

"Well, I'm going to go through with it," she said.

It was a little difficult for Broggers to achieve a genuine frown, but he kept a brief pucker that had to serve the purpose.

"And, anyway," she continued, "I'm just about tired of all this talk about other people's souls."

"But I'm not talking about other people's souls," protested Broggers.

Judy stared at him for a minute, and then broke up into smiles again.

"You mean you're talking about mine?" she said.
"But how do you know I've got one?"

Her bus was rolling up into the offing now, and Broggers took both her hands in his plump grasp.

"Because you've kept it white," he said.

CHAPTER XV

WHICH RUNS ITS HEAD AGAINST A WALL

WELL, it had come at last, a fleeting visitor no doubt, or one, at any rate, that might not descend again for many a long month yet; but it had come, and, as Lesseps said, that was the chief thing. He rubbed his hands, too, when he said it, with just enough proprietary complacency to rouse up his companion's indignation. For there happened to be a visitor in his studio at the moment, none other indeed than "old Philpot," still drawing-master at Drayton, but reduced, in the enlightened eyes of twenty-one, to a mere forty-nine or fifty—comparative youth, and at least a ten years' advantage over Lesseps.

The two old friends were hobnobbing over the drawing together, just before Robin came in; and each, as a matter of fact, had been indecently claiming the lion's share of critical foresight.

"I took him at half-fees, anyway," said Lesseps, "and spent the very devil of a lot of trouble over him, just because—well, just because of the possibility of this."

He laid a lean finger-tip on Norah's head.

"Ah!" challenged Philpot, "but I spotted it first; and at fourteen, my boy, or thereabouts." He clapped Lesseps' round shoulder with some vehemence. "At fourteen, what d'you say to that? And in a public-school drawing-class, too?"

Lesseps blinked up through his glasses, raising his bristly gray eyebrows.

"You don't appear to realize," he observed, still pointing at the head and tapping it with his finger, "you don't appear to realize that without me this wouldn't have been possible."

"Nonsense! It was inevitable. You were merely an accident on the way."

"Well, if it comes to that," said Lesseps, "you were no better."

"But I was first; and that's all I'm sticking out for."

He picked up the drawing and looked at it again.

"Where did you get it from?" he went on.

"Tommy Twigg," said Lesseps.

"The baby-man?"

"The same. Sent it on to me last week—thought I ought to see it. Said my pupil did. it at the end of his wedding-dinner."

"What's he doing?" asked Philpot; "young Rivers, I mean? I've lost sight of him, you know, though I believe he turned up at his old house a few months ago. What's his profession?"

"Tea," said Lesseps.

"Tea? Tasting and spitting, eh?"

He looked down at the little drawing with a wry face.

Lesseps shrugged his shoulders and laughed.

"He's not promoted to the spitting part yet. That's to come, he tells me."

"Lord!" said Philpot, "what a mixed-up world it is, isn't it? He left school early, I remember, went somewhere cheap. No money, I suppose."

Lesseps shook his head.

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"I don't know," he said. "Shouldn't think so. Those sort of people generally haven't."

"What sort?"

"The sort that can do that, and go on doing it."

"Then you think there'll be some more?"

"So do you."

Philpot lit a cigar.

"But—tasting and spitting. It seems so damned incongruous, doesn't it? Will he do both, think you?"

"Well, if one of 'em's inevitable, as you say——"

"T'other must go to the wall," put in Philpot.

"But that's just the devil of it—when the wall's a ten-footer, with spikes, and stands slap across the path, eh? We know walls just like that."

But Lesseps shook his head.

"There's no wall this side of Death can stop the Real Thing, my boy," he said, "when it's once on the march. And this'll set it marching. You see if it doesn't."

This was how Robin found them; and, recognizing Philpot, blushed a little in spite of himself, and fell back into something of the old schoolboy attitude.

"It was only meant for Tommy," he explained. Then he looked at Lesseps.

"Is it good?" he asked.

Lesseps frowned at him.

"You've got an awful lot to learn," he said; "a terrible lot."

Robin grinned, at his ease once more.

"I say——" he began, but tripped himself up.

"Well?"

"I want to get on to clay," he announced.

Lesseps looked positively fierce.

"But I stipulated for at least a year of the pencil—

the pencil and nothing else," he said; "and you haven't been at it four months."

"You've been jolly decent to me," said Robin, casting a glance at Philpot, who was blowing smoke-rings across the studio, with twinkling eyes.

"I'm not a sculptor, you know," said Lesseps.

"But Jack said—for a beginning."

"You should never listen to what Jack says. When do you want to start?"

Robin lifted a tentative eyebrow.

"To-morrow?" he suggested.

Lesseps took him by the shoulders and pushed him round.

"Eyes front!" he said. "Quick marrrch!"

And Robin marched; since by the strangest of coincidences, there lay in the far corner of the room, beneath two layers of dripping cloth, half a hundred-weight of clay.

"What about walls now?" said Lesseps, who had lived all his life in a studio, and possessed, no doubt, a somewhat restricted outlook upon life.

Robin's back was towards them, as he bent down over this shapeless but glorious stuff of dreams.

"They take a lot of climbing, all the same," said Philpot; "or—well, breaking, if you like; even when they're only made of tea-leaves,"—a sage enough remark, very likely, but in this instance, perhaps, a little wide of the target. For Robin's wall, as of course Philpot couldn't possibly know, though it might stretch itself broadside to his desire, was, at any rate, not solely built of tea-leaves.

And in fact, as far as Robin himself was concerned, there was hardly a wall at all, though each step of this year that followed might be leading him to its feet.

At any rate, he had never lifted his eyes to look upon it, so thronged now had become the present hours of every day. For once he had got his fingers into the clay—back into the clay, it always seemed to him—the keenness, the abandon, to use a better but still not the right word, for which Lesseps had been complaining, asserted itself very thoroughly; so that each possible moment that could be squeezed from the all-too-crowded hours was spent in his particular corner of the old man's studio. If life had been worth living before it became trebly so now, even though its goldenest minutes must still be odd ones. For Betty's letter on the evening of Tommy's dinner had, at any rate, impressed upon him the necessity of sticking diligently to such responsibilities as he had already undertaken, even if there were occasions when he couldn't help grudging the time that they swallowed up.

Betty, too, in these days, surprisingly quick to see the effort, had taken it to her comfort if not to her complete satisfaction. And yet, after all, though she yearned at times to transplant Robin bodily (since they might not marry yet) into some more congenial and safer atmosphere, it could not but be well that his faith should be tested, should learn to realize something of the dangers that beset all human pathways, and emerge, please God! the brighter from the trial.

Then, too, holding secret from her his new devotion, Robin had assured her that he was spending very little time upon his drawing just now, far less than formerly—a half-truth that was to hide from her, until the crucial moment should arrive, the revelation of his real endeavors.

And yet, for all the outward calm that now surrounded these marching months, there had crept into her heart some sense of want in her relationship with him that could scarcely be described in any words at her command, but was real enough to crop up, now and again, in her rare, unoccupied moments, and bid her take stock of this compact between them. This would be the fruit perhaps, she sometimes reflected, of the curious lack of true intimacy with any of her fellow-beings that would seem, until her engagement to Robin, to have been her lot; so that now, when for the first time it had been vouchsafed to her, she was perhaps asking for too much. And yet, even so, wasn't she happier, she would wonder, in those last few days when Robin's feeling for her still rested unannounced, but was obvious enough to set her whole life thrilling at its presence? But then, if that were so, had her love for him been growing smaller? No, she was quite sure of that, surer of it almost than of anything else in the world. His love for her, then? Well, it always came round to this point, at which, being both a healthy and busy young woman, she would thrust the matter from her and get into moral harness again, as she expressed it to herself. She couldn't be too glad, either, that Robin's attitude in her little circle seemed to have entirely reassured it of his spiritual faithfulness; and she was inclined to agree with Peter that the absence of the Castletons might be largely responsible for this.

For Jack and Lilah, towards the end of the summer, had departed for Australia, where Jack had been commissioned to do some work on various public buildings—a year's job at the briefest; so that the flat in Bayswater now contained merely a housekeeper, morally

harmless, though instructed by her master to allow Mr. Rivers a complete run of the studio. And it was here that, for the months of this next winter, Robin worked early and late, except on such evenings as he attended a life-class in Kensington, exulting vicariously in the possession of a real studio of his own, and blessing Jack daily for the boon that he had conferred upon him—busy months, that fled by uneventfully enough, but sufficiently punctuated to avoid monotony.

Thus, towards the end of the year, Chris gained an unexpected success in his Final Surgery, and foresaw himself in May a fully-blown practitioner; while to afford the proper relief to so striking an occasion, there would occur from time to time such commonplace incidents as the appearance, at Robin's hands, of a well-turned hand or foot, a bust showing signs of progress, but not quite good enough yet, or the news that Tommy Twigg had achieved not one only, but actually a pair of real, live, plump, female babies. (Twins *commonplace*? Well, a one-in-sixty chance, at any rate. But *such* twins! Whereupon Tommy must be taken by the shoulders and removed for a moment or two, gently, since twins after all must be reckoned as a plausible excuse for a digression, but firmly, because their father is only a minor character.)

So the winter passed; and it was not until the middle of March that there sprang up, out of the fulness of spring, no doubt, but apparently (or, at any rate, he thought so) from the enterprise of his own imagination, Robin's great Idea, the first Idea that, seen in a medium of clay, might be worthy, if God were with him and funds allowed to be translated into marble—his first-fruits for Betty's feet, and

beyond her to the world at large. It was rum, too, how suddenly it came. One moment it was not; and another moment, and, behold, it was, and would be for evermore—built up of its component parts with such more than lightning speed, that in the wink of an eyelid, there She was, the simplest, subtlest, most complicated, most spontaneous, most human, most divine, most material, most ethereal little personage in all the universe; and all because of the pulling of some mental, or spiritual, trigger, by a dissipated rascal whose toes were sticking out of his boot-tips.

It was extraordinary, and even more extraordinary that he should have been able to conceal Her coming from Betty, with whom he was walking home. For, at the corner of Petherington Street, She was not, while in George Street, where the trams run down towards Stoke Newington, She was—shining out above the lights and the crowds, and the dusky inter-spaces, transforming them, humbling and glorifying them, in such an astounding and manifest fashion that surely Betty must have been purblind not to see Her.

In a way, too, it was Betty herself who had been primarily responsible for Her.

"Oh, *do* look!" she said, pulling his arm. "Look at that absurd picture of Spurgeon."

Turning round, and looking down at his feet, Robin beheld, chalked upon the pavement, the likeness of a rosy and entirely harmless cleric, with vivid eyes and a drooping, chestnut-brown mustache. This was the extreme effort of a series (and a sop to the neighborhood, that was called David Garrick in other quarters, and Arthur Shrewsbury in St. John's Wood), and over against it reclined its creator, who now cocked a bleary eye in their direction, and made a grab at

a despondent bowler hat—an uncertain but all too eloquent grab.

Robin fumbled in his pocket, chuckling at Spurgeon, and moved to pity by his producer; but Betty whispered to him not to stay.

"Can't you see that he'll only spend it on drink?" she said.

"I know," said Robin. "But——"

He glanced down at the upturned, grimy toes.

"It isn't charity to give like that," she said. "It isn't, really."

"I know," said Robin reluctantly, and then—well, it was then that the miracle appeared. For, behold, from the pavement at their feet, shone down upon by the flickering lamp-post flame, there stared at them, among the others, the garish presentment of an imaginary landscape. To right and left were mountains, purple in line, and converging, it appeared, to be the distant boundary of some glass-like Highland lake, over which, in colors unknown to nature, a setting sun was dispersing its last rays. In the foreground rose the tree-tops of a pine-covered island, throwing a dark relief against the light behind, and from one of them a bird was winging its flight, poised there between the mountains and the sky.

"By Jove, Betty!" he said; "look at that!"

Betty laughed.

"You mean the colors," she said; "aren't they awful?"

"No, I don't," said Robin; but stopped there, because he couldn't explain to her exactly what he did mean.

Underneath the composition were scrawled the words, "My own idea."

Did this man have ideas, then—this beer-sodden husk of manhood, blinking up at them tipsily from his desolate vigil—and such ideas? Did he really dream sometimes of mountain-lakes with the sunset on them, from whose islands the birds might beat their confident way up the quiet air? Could hands like those really draw such ideas for other men to see, wedged there, in impossible colors (but still there), between the presumably more popular “Soldier’s Farewells” and red-cheeked Spurgeons. It was incredible, and yet—well, there it was—“Before the Army the Band, gentlemen,”—his own idea, for all the unlovely pastiness of his flabby cheeks and blue, unshaven chin—just as though, even here, something, some struggling and stunted divinity, had tottered up, for a moment, to its feet, that it might set its trembling lips thus once to the heavenly bugle.

Then a dog, springing back towards its master, stumbled over the fellow’s knees, and he lunged at it savagely.

“Gawd *damn* ye!” they heard him say, while Robin felt the sudden pressure of Betty’s arm, urging him on their way.

And by that he knew that she had not seen it, this Idea that on holy wings had come to himself, this vision of a shining and shackled prisoner who yet had so far triumphed as for one glorious moment to lift up its human jailer from his slough, to assert its broken kingship, and bending him to its will, bid him produce his evidence of God. And here, too, and in a larger sense, might surely be a parable of all humanity,—no new conception, certainly, but wonderful all the same,—of the white angel in bonds that lives at its heart, and can never be utterly immured. He saw her

(the pronoun changed itself quite naturally), this Psyche in the dark, yearning from the gloom to her unknown, celestial lover, this poor soul of man, and yet by no means poor, for all its boundaries of sin, but young eternally, and deathless, and unsullied, upspringing towards God with eager, beseeching hands. He saw her beautiful and virginal; and he saw her white like marble.

"D'you know," smiled Betty, "you haven't spoken to me for more than ten whole minutes?"

"Eh?" said Robin. "What? Haven't I? Why, we're here already! Oh, I say! Well, never mind. Better luck next time. No, I can't come in this evening. Thursday? Right you are, or if not, Friday. Good-night!"

"Good-night!"

Beautiful and virginal, and white, like marble, that was how he would describe her, yearning heavenwards, but not—— There came to his ears the strident tones of a passing bus conductor, "Orl the wy to the Ingel, 'Olborn, 'Yde Pawk, an' Piccadilly. Orl the wy to the Ingel;" and a man pushed by him to scramble up on to the clattering vehicle; so that for a moment he was back again in this blazing human whirlpool, with the multitudes tramping round him on their million ways; but only for a moment; "Orl the wy to the Ingel;" no, not winged, and with the hint in her poise of the prison bars that held her back but yet were not finally impregnable, since that would make her the most tragical, grievous figure of all the ages, whereas he beheld instead——

He looked at his watch. It was still only seven o'clock, and he could be home in half an hour, with all the way there a glowing vista, down which her

beckoning fingers were bidding him hurry to her making.

But at his doorway in Bayswater it was no vision of the spirit that took his hands; and instead, Judy—Judy herself—emerged from her twelvemonth's silence, muffled up in the softest (and most expensive) of furs, and with a glimmer of jewels in her hair.

"Oh, I'm so glad!" she cried, holding both his hands. "I thought I hadn't a friend left—not one. The Castletons in Australia, and Bob at Cannes, and Chris at Cambridge—I was almost beginning to cry. I was, really. Aren't you glad to see me?"

"Why, of course I am," he said, laughing. "What d'you think?"

"Didn't you know I was back?"

"How should I?"

"It's in most of the papers. There's a picture of me in last week's *Talker*."

"Is there? I never saw it. But I say, you—you're looking jolly fit."

"Fit as a tinker," said Judy. "Aren't you going to give me something to eat?"

"Rather!" said Robin, and Mrs. Pollock was given instructions, while Judy, throwing off her cloak, revealed herself to him in the full glory of her latest evening-gown, a petal of diamonds in her hair, and a little shower of pearls falling delicately about her smooth shoulders. Seeing his face, she laughed.

"Do you like me?" she asked him.

"Rather!" he said again. "But, I say—tell me where you've sprung from, you know, and what you're doing, and why you never wrote to anybody."

She dropped down into a chair before the fire, holding her hands towards the flames.

"Oh, I never write letters," she said; "I don't know how to. I came over last week in the *Campania*."

"Then you've——" Robin's eyes still rested on the gown she wore, so dazzlingly simple, and yet so just right.

"Made a hit?" she said, and nodded her head. "Yes," she went on; "I told you I would, didn't I? Why, I—I was actually preached about, you know, banned from a real pulpit. That's fame, if you like. I'm rather rich, too, even already. So you haven't heard?"

She seemed a trifle disappointed.

"Only rumors," said Robin. "Tommy got an American paper with a paragraph in it about you."

"The papers were about evenly divided," she said. "Half of them called me all the bad names they could think of. And the rest praised me up to the skies. But the halls were crowded—crowded."

Her eyes were dancing as she looked at him.

"Have you come back to Highbury?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"No," she said. "It wouldn't do, you know. I've got rooms at the Magnifique." Robin whistled. "And I'm to appear at the Halycon next week, for two months. Haven't you seen my name on the buses—La Belle Aurore. First appearance in England?"

Robin shook his head.

"How blind you are!" she cried; "and they're putting me up in electric lights over the Halycon Portico. I'm a celebrity, you know."

"So I see," said Robin; and altogether there was so much to be told that the telling of it lasted well through dinner and into the hour beyond. Then

suddenly she snapped the narrative short, and nodded her head to him.

"Tell me about yourself," she said. But really there was very little to tell, unless—and then, in a twink, there he was headlong into the story of his inspiration, with all its astonishing possibilities. Once he broke off.

"But, I say, I'm boring you?" he asked, seeing a new look in her eyes. She shook her head.

"No, you're not," she smiled. "Go on. I like it. I haven't heard anybody talk just like that for more than a year." She was looking at him quite gravely now. "Fame has its penalties, you know."

So Robin plunged on. What did she think of it? And did she think he could ever do it? And ought he to put it into marble? It would mean selling out at least forty pounds of his little capital. Would she perhaps care to come down to the studio? He had a few things there he would like her to see—only rotten ones, of course, nothing to what this would be, or might be, in the hands of somebody really good. Robin had keys both for the flat and the outside door of the studio; and they entered through the flat, Judy with her cloak over her arm. Robin made her a confession.

"I was going to begin to-night," he said.

"And I've interrupted you!" she cried. "What a shame! And now it's past nine o'clock." She went over to the street-door, and unbolting it, set it open to the air. It was a clear night, with the stars above the roof-tops winking down at them from a windy sky. She took a deep breath.

"D'you know," she said, turning to him, "it's wonderfully good to be back again. I almost believe

I've been homesick without knowing it—like suppressed measles, you know."

Robin came and stood by her side; and seeing them there, in the open doorway, a passing cabman raised his whip expectantly.

"Shall we?" asked Judy suddenly.

"Go for a drive?"

"Why not? Let's run up to Highbury. I want to get some of my things; and it isn't too late. Come along!"

She waved to the cabman, and he pulled his horse round to the curb in front of them.

"Never mind your cap," she said, "my furs will do for both of us."

Robin laughed, and settled himself comfortably at her side, as she dictated the address through the little trap-door above their heads.

"Ah," said Judy, "there's nothing like home, is there? Even when you haven't got one. I never knew I loved London so much."

They bowled through the quiet streets, listening to the London sounds and the jingle of the bells upon the harness, and arrived at Highbury all too soon.

"You must come in, of course," said Judy, and they mounted the familiar steps together. It was more than twelve months since either of them had stood within the little room under the roof; but Mrs. Boxer had been conscientious, and it was all as Judy left it, with the curtains as fresh as yesterday, and the pictures shining down at them from the walls, like the faces of old friends. There was the piano, too, from which she had sung to him, and which stood there now to emphasize their growing sense of comradeship. And there in the corner was the twirling

dancing-girl, whom nobody in England could have matched.

"Now, if your Idea——" began Judy, and then stopped short.

"Look here!" she said, "shall I sit to you for her?"

"You?"

Robin stared at her, with his mouth open. Then, recovering himself, he stammered, "But I—I——"

"Oh, I know what you're going to say!" she said, "and I'm not going to let you sell out your capital on my account. But, if you'd like it——" She smiled, opening her arms a little. "If you'll have me."

"*Have* you?"

In the wildest of his dreams he had never even touched upon the fringe of this. And, as a matter of fact, the question of a suitable model had scarcely yet occurred to him. He could have got one from the school, perhaps, or Lesseps would have helped him, or there was even Polly Green, who might have done at a pinch. But Judy?

She was laughing at him now, with his round mouth and staring eyes; and presently, slipping back into a thirteen-year-old fashion of wearier days, she dropped him a curtsy in her shimmering silks.

"Please, will I do?" she asked.

But all he could do was to take her hands, and say—

"Oh, Judy! oh, by Jove! if—but you don't *really* mean it, do you?"

This was the night when Peter stayed somewhat late at the meeting of a workingmen's committee; so that at half-past nine, or thereabouts, he found himself rounding the corner of that opposite house to his

own in which Mrs. Boxer let respectable lodgings. It was odd that he should have turned it, however, at this particular moment, though, as it seemed to him afterwards, there was Something greater than chance in the little coincidence.

For here, in jewels and furs, was a woman, none other, as a sure instinct told him, than the friend of Robin's earlier days, dismounting from a hansom cab, with Robin in the wake hatless, and with shining eyes, as the lamplight clearly showed him. Pulled up short in his tracks, he watched them, held between two warring impulses, and saw them mount the steps together and presently disappear within the house. Glancing down at his watch, he noticed that the time was twenty minutes to ten; and, looking up again, he beheld the cabman preparing to depart.

"It's no good keeping him," Judy had said. "We may be half an hour or more, and we're sure to find another."

The cabman, noticing Peter's interest (but failing to observe his clerical appearance), bent down a little from his seat, with a genial hand against his mouth.

"Enjoyin' of theirselves, what?" he said, nodding at the shut door; and whipped up his horse with a grin.

But there was no answering smile on Peter's face, as slowly he crossed the road, though as yet he did not permit himself to formulate any definite accusation. Of this much, however, he was quite sure, that in so far as he himself was concerned there were certain things for which he held, as it were, a watching brief from God.

And that for which he held a brief lay towering now, broadside to Robin's path; and Philpot maybe would have likened it to a wall.

CHAPTER XVI

WHICH BEGINS THE STORY OF A BIRTHDAY

NOTHING quite like this had ever happened to Peter before; and it took him some little time to make up his mind as to his proper course of action. For though he knew his world well, and was sufficiently a chip of the old block, as he had been admiringly described, to face the facts like the Christian man that he professed to be, yet there was no doubt that here was a case requiring a considerable amount of spiritual discretion.

After all, too, there was not a very great deal to go upon, though quite enough to make some sort of action in the matter imperative, even if it were merely the bestowing of some brotherly advice by one older in Christian experience upon a fellow-pilgrim less advanced. And this was the course upon which, in the end, he decided to embark, resolving, as a corollary, that he would say nothing, for the moment at any rate, either to Betty or his father, the incident being too unproven for a final pronouncement, but yet too grave to form the topic of a merely casual conversation. Besides, having seen Robin, his own attitude in the affair would no doubt become clearer. He would know better how to proceed, that is if any further steps should become necessary, though he had great hopes that a personal interview, a face-to-face discussion of the whole question, would perhaps settle it

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altogether. Such a meeting should be approached, of course, with no little preparation, and in a strength greater than his own, since, though friendly, he must needs be unsparing.

Thus it was that Robin found himself greeted on Friday (the Psyche being already on her banker) with a little more than Peter's usual heartiness, while a kindly hand pressed him for a moment into Mr. Wing's study, that happened to be empty.

"I say, old chap," began Peter, and related briefly his discovery of two evenings ago. And at first, not gathering Peter's deeper meaning, Robin stared at him, frankly amused at the coincidence and supposing that he was being half humorously chided for not having recognized his future brother-in-law upon the pavement. But in a minute or two it became apparent that this was not the point to which Peter was so obviously leading, and that the issue was something rather obscure but at any rate unpleasant.

"I'm right, am I not," said Peter, "in believing that she was the—the person, whom you came to know, when you first lived with us?"

Robin nodded.

"Quite right," he said, flushing a little.

"Her name I think is——"

"Dubroullé," said Robin—"Madame Dubroullé."

"Madame? She's married then?"

"Yes."

"A—a widow?"

"No. Her husband's alive."

"Does he live over there, too, then?"

Peter made a sideway movement with his head, in the direction of the opposite side of the street.

"No. He lives in Paris. I believe."

"They're separated?"

"They don't live together?"

Robin was growing redder than ever under this cross-examination, but Peter's eyes never wavered from his face.

"Are they divorced?"

"I really don't know. I don't think so. No, I'm sure they're not. She told me so. I believe—I believe he's rather a rotter."

"What is he?"

"An artist. Paul Dubroullé. He's rather well known, you know."

Peter paused for a moment.

"But I thought," he went on, "I understood that you had promised Betty to—well, not to see this woman?"

Robin opened his eyes.

"Promised Betty? Good gracious, no! Betty doesn't mind."

Peter raised his eyebrows a little.

"At any rate," he pursued, "Betty assured me once that you saw very little of her."

Robin laughed.

"Well, she's been abroad," he said.

"On the stage?"

"Yes."

"As a—a——"

"I've never seen her," said Robin, "on the stage."

Peter took a turn up and down the room.

"Have you thought," he said at last, "what might have been inferred from what I saw the other night?"

Robin was at a loss, but with one thing clearly defined, at any rate,—the resolve that, until its final

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accomplishment, this work upon which he and Judy were engaged was to be kept a secret.

"We just went up there to get some of her things. She's only been back a week, you know."

"But supposing," said Peter, "somebody else—one of the men from Hoxton, an elder of the church, or even a vanboy, had seen you—what do you imagine they would have thought?"

Robin opened his eyes.

"I don't know," he said. "Why should they have thought anything?"

It was Peter's turn to be a little baffled now. Was Robin wilfully mocking him, or had that innate sense of modesty with which all civilized humanity (in Protestant countries at any rate) is endowed been so blunted by careless companionship that now he was unable to see how horribly close upon the fringes of transgression he was at least appearing to tread?

"But don't you see," he reiterated, "that for a Christian, Robin"—he paused for a moment—"you know what she is, I suppose?" he added.

Robin saw now that Peter obviously didn't understand.

"Judy? Why, she's a ripper. She is really. You'd like her like anything. She's an awfully good sort. Everybody says so."

"Everybody?"

"Well, Jack, or Chris, or old Broggers, or Lomax, or any of them."

Peter was silent for a minute. Then he laid a hand on Robin's sleeve.

"Look here," he said, "I don't want to seem rude, Robin, or narrow-minded, but there are certain things that as converted men you and I have got to face.

And do you honestly think that the opinion of any of those whom you have mentioned can be taken as a guide, not for what is possible, mind you, but for what, to a Christian, is expedient?"

Robin's cheeks, which had become normal, grew red again.

"Oh, I don't know," he said, and would have given anything to be able to explain the whole position to Peter, to tell him about the Psyche, and Judy's wonderful offer, to bid him remember how she was, or, at any rate, once had been, the loveliest model in London—all this; but now he mustn't; he must keep silent till he could turn to them at last triumphantly, to Peter, and Betty, and all of them, and say, "Behold!"

"Of course," pursued Peter, "I've said nothing to Betty about all this. I'm speaking to you as man to man." He paused. "I've got to go north next week," he went on, "to help in a mission in Manchester. But before I go I should like you to tell me honestly, Robin, as Christian man to Christian man"—he emphasized the words a little—"that you have had no—no——"

Robin's face was still blank of any proper understanding.

"No unworthy dealings with this woman?"

Robin chuckled.

"Good Lord, no!" he said; "I mean, of course I haven't. I'm sorry, Peter—the words slipped out."

Betty met them at the door.

"You've been having rather a long confab, you two," she said, looking at them curiously. "What's it all been about?"

Robin kissed her.

"Oh, nothing," he said. "Old Peter saw me in the

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street, and I never noticed him, you know, that's all."

That wasn't quite all of course, and though Peter's disturbance at the incident still remained a puzzle to him, the fact of it rather rankled in Robin's memory for some little time; though only for a little time, to be buried very soon under the turmoil of conflicting hopes and fears, with which each day now became more than crowded.

Ah, they were wonderful days these, even if they were only to be a sort of Indian summer, too glamorous to be lasting. They were wonderful, matchless days, and unregrettable, even in the light of presently. For Judy was as good as her word, and lent herself, body and soul, with a really surprising earnestness, to the project in hand—at first, it was true, with a sort of half-amusement but very soon with a lively and growing interest in the progress of her little replica. These sittings, too, made a welcome contrast to her daily appearances at the Halycon—where she was regarded, no doubt, from many very different points of view, but certainly not entirely from this one. And yet they were a funny pair, she reflected, to be producing between them this white-limbed allegory of a human soul, uniting here, for an hour or two of every day, he, from his dusty office, and herself, from the almost equally unpromising atmosphere of lime-light and cigars—or if one would have it in another fashion, he who for all his talent (and it was really quite uncommon) was yet, she supposed, a Wing, and she—well, to be quite honest, Judy could not be very sure of herself just now.

And, anyway, a little uncertainty was surely excusable when the opinions flying about in the papers

were at once so various and conflicting. For in a milder, though still lucrative fashion, she was repeating in England her sensation of America. And, as a minor consequence, some of the halfpenny papers contained a brisk correspondence on her merits and demerits.

Sometimes she would read these letters aloud to Robin, discovering herself to be at once artistic and degrading, elevating and immoral, instructive and "poisonous," the last adjective emanating from a prominent Nonconformist minister, who described in detail a photograph of Judy that he had seen in a shop-window.

"Only it wasn't me at all," laughed Judy, "but a relief of Flaxman's, that he was stirring up his absurd little suet-pudding soul about,"—to all of which Robin listened politely enough, though without, as Judy saw very well, paying any real attention to the matter.

It piqued her just a little bit, too, or would have done, if he hadn't been such a boy, although her reason recommended it to her as the true artist's attitude.

"You don't seem to care a bit how well I'm doing," she told him once.

Robin looked at her quickly.

"Why, of course I do," he said.

"Why don't you ever come and see me, then?"

"I shall, some night."

"I don't believe you will, and I'm off to Paris in the beginning of May."

And that was just the worst of it all, for as matters were she could only spare him two hours a day (since she was billed to appear at ten, and must dine first),

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while the days themselves were so few in number that Robin saw himself deserted long before his Psyche had struggled out into marble.

"Oh, somebody else will do, if you haven't finished her by then," she said.

"Ah, but they won't," cried Robin; "they won't, really! They wouldn't tell me things, like you do, either."

"Well, then, what about Sundays? I can give you as long as you like then."

"Can you—can you really?"

"Of course. I've nothing to do. A silly dinner-party with a lot of people I don't like, or something—nothing that matters."

Robin hesitated. Then he burned his boats. For, after all, this was the opportunity of a lifetime, and it wouldn't be so very difficult to get substitutes for his Bible class at Islington and the meeting at Hoxton; whereas Judy—

"Won't your friends be shocked, though?" inquired Judy.

Robin laughed confidently.

"Not when they see the result," he said. "It is going to be good, isn't it?" whereupon, since her answer wouldn't have stopped him in any case, she merely smiled and told him to get along with his work.

And all the time, poised there upon her banker, his Psyche was growing beneath his hands, the supple and eager vision of his dreams, materializing here, and losing, indeed, less in the process than he had dared to think possible. She was not perfect, of course; and later on, when she had come back from the pointer's, and stood there in the marble before

him, his critical faculty told him that she could never be that. But she was good to look upon, all the same; and there began now to come moments when he would lay aside his tools and let his eyes devour her—greedy, godlike moments they were, when he could loose the reins upon his pride and let it feed itself at will. These were the first rewards of his six weeks' work, six weeks of the hardest work that he had ever known, work that had called him from his bed in the early hours, and hurried him home from business to sit up over it till long past midnight. Beside it, his ordinary daily duties, his tasks at the office, became the merest soulless automatism, and indeed, when set over against this new, enthralling service, could scarcely be called work at all.

But it was exacting, all the same, and in a sense he would be glad when this double demand should cease to fall upon him. Several of the fellows at the office had told him how ill he was looking, and both Betty and her aunt had observed the same thing. Never mind though, in quite a short time now, a fortnight, or even a week perhaps, his little Psyche would stand revealed, the joyful and complete explanation of all these pale cheeks, reticences, evasions, and misunderstandings. For there had been one or two misunderstandings. There was no denying it. And he had been hard put to it sometimes to stand foursquare to all these gusts of questioning.

That first Sunday had been awkward to explain, for instance, so awkward that he had not attempted to avoid his duties upon any of their successors, until these last two, when once again the temptation had become too strong for him. Betty would not, perhaps, have heard about these, and, in any case, he had not

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seen her for more than a week. But then these were Judy's positively last remaining days, and there were such endless, seductive touches still calling for attention.

Never mind, in a week, in one more week, Betty should be brought here, should be led triumphantly to these delicate, shining feet, and told there that in reality they were at hers, that they were all hers, head, hands, feet, all the beautiful, vigorous body, and the message that it epitomized.

"Do you know," Judy said to him, "you're far more in love with your Psyche than you've ever been with anything else in your life or,—or anybody either," she added, under her breath.

Robin looked up from his chisel.

"Do you think so?" he laughed. "Oh, I don't know."

And this was the late afternoon of that April day, the twenty-eighth it was, a Thursday (and Betty's birthday), whose every detail was to remain so clear in his remembrance that, looking back, it would seem to have laid such gluttonous hands upon experience as to tower above all other days, past and to come, something swollen and monstrous, and yet, for all its windy tragedy, perhaps a little grotesque as well.

And this would be because, as a cooler judgment would demonstrate, they were none of them—the chief actors in this little drama that was coming—quite themselves to-day; so that, if the action were inevitable (it was, of course, and had been so all along), the performance of it became, no doubt, a little extravagant.

There was his broken promise to Betty, in the first place, that he would spend the evening of her

birthday at Highbury, where there was to be a little gathering for the festival; while to set against that there was the distracting tilt of the chin that Judy had shown him only last night, just a fractional change, but one that would effect such a very real improvement. He *must* get home to see to that. He really must; so that at the last moment, at about four o'clock, he had sent Betty a note by a messenger-boy, a cunning note that had taken him at least an hour to concoct, and was the first that he had ever sent her by so confidential (and expensive) a method.

Then, on the way home, there had been that queer, giddy feeling, making him glad that there was a lamp-post at hand, and a little alarming, though transient enough, and quickly forgotten after a cup of tea and a glimpse of the Psyche. There was a note, too, awaiting him at home, in Margaret's round-handed writing. She was frightfully sorry if she had stumbled upon a skeleton in his cupboard—that was how she put it; but she and her father were in town for the day, and they had persuaded Chris to let them peep into the studio. "And oh, Robin," she wrote, "she's *ripping*, she is really, so dainty, and pleading, and—well, simply sweet. It made me feel sort of creepy all over, you know, with pride, because I knew you."

Robin was feeling better now, less dizzy and sick; and really it wasn't half bad of the kid to write like that. Of course he didn't mind her seeing it a bit, so long as she didn't tell anybody for a few days. Presently, too, she was coming back to the flat, she said, to meet her father, who had sent her to the Stores to do some shopping while he went to the British Museum. Probably, though, she wouldn't

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come down to the studio again, as Judy would be sure to be sitting for him then, wouldn't she? And that was decent of her, too—to think of that.

He found himself smiling at the world once more. And it was easy to smile at the world just now—the poor ignorant world that knew nothing of the Psyche.

“I say, what time did you go to bed last night?” pursued Judy presently.

Robin laughed.

“Last night?”

“Well, this morning then.”

“Oh, about three.”

“You'll make yourself ill, if you go on like that, you know.”

“Oh, no, I shan't, and besides I've done pretty nearly all I'm going to do.”

He could chatter to her this evening, with the burden rolled from his mind; for these were the last touches, that must be so tender as to become caresses almost. And caresses are seldom difficult. Presently he put down his tools, standing back a little, with half-closed eyes. Then he turned to her.

“Could you?” he asked. “Just for a moment, Judy?”

And for a moment she stood there, reproducing to him, as a whole, his statue, that was itself a reproduction of her own beauty—but yet other than that, though Robin couldn't see this. For because she was at any rate half an actress, he must tell her that she had given it all to him, all his dream; so that while there might well have been wings upon her shoulders, yet he could have sworn that there were chains about her feet.

Then she came to him, and they stood side by side looking together at the little figure, with its youthful, rounded limbs, and its hands reached out to God. He turned to her with exulting eyes.

"Do you remember," he asked her, "when I first saw your dancing-girl, and you told me that she was you—do you remember how you said that there wasn't a sculptor in England who could have done anything so good?"

She was still looking at the Psyche.

"Did I?" she said. "Did I say that?"

Then she smiled.

"Some day I'll have to unsay it," she added. He took her hands impulsively.

"Have I done you justice, Judy?" he asked.

She let her eyes rest on him for a moment, and then, struck suddenly by a change in her expression—

"What's the matter?" he cried. "Are you disappointed?"

"Disappointed?" she repeated, "of course not. But—but oh, you silly boy, don't you see—don't you see that it isn't me at all?"

He stared at her without comprehending.

"Look!" she said; "look at her, at her—oh, at her everything. Look at her face!"

"Why?" he asked slowly. "Isn't her face pretty?"

"Pretty? Oh, it's pretty enough. Well, then, it's lovely. There, I've told you right out—just what I think. It's lovely and it's innocent, and—well, it's your idea. But don't you see that it's the face of—of somebody quite different, of somebody young, of an *ingénue*, a—girl only?"

Robin was puzzled.

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"Well?" he said, and then looked back into her eyes.

"Why, you're crying," he stammered.

And it was this, perhaps, that made her leave her gloves behind. She had gone out by the street door, and for a minute or two he didn't notice them, not indeed until Jack's housekeeper knocked at the other door and he half turned his head to say "Come in." Then he saw them lying on a chair near the middle of the room—silk gloves they were, of some pale color, one of them resting crumpled on the seat, and the other hanging over the back.

But nobody came in, and forgetting them he turned again to the little marble figure, so lifelike now as to have become, in very deed almost, the real child of his brain and hand—an extraordinary thing, if one stopped for a minute to think about it, to be able thus to gather one's handful of beauty out of some secret garden of God, and taking this earthly stone, to bid it blossom there for all mankind to see.

So she stood there before him, his Dream become visible, become tangible even to clumsy, human fingers. She stood there before him, wonderful, and holy, and white. He bent his head that his lips might touch her feet.

"Oh, you darling!" he cried to himself. "You darling!"

It was just then that he became aware of somebody standing in the doorway, after all, and turning round he saw two figures there, in the light of the gas-bracket—Peter, a half-step in front of his sister. And at first there swept over him a rush of disappoint-

ment, that died in a moment, because after all, to any but an expert, the Psyche might well seem complete, while it was surely good (it was a miracle almost), that now, in so supreme a moment, Betty should mysteriously have come to him. It was her birthday, too, and stepping aside a little that she might see his gift to her, in all its full significance, he stood there, facing them with a smile. How incredulous they must be. No wonder they were stricken so silent in the doorway. He opened his mouth to speak to them, but it was so curiously dry that no words would come from it. Never mind, they would understand. At least——

Then something seemed suddenly to make a catch at him and fasten him in his tracks. *Were* they understanding?

Afterwards it became so easy to piece together the other side of the picture, the broken promises, the shirked responsibilities, the messenger-boy, the culminating suspicions; so easy to realize that he had expected too much, and to perceive also that here was something more than a mere opposing of persons,—the shock of two age-long tides upon whose breasts they were as puppets. Afterwards it was so easy, but now——

For now, reading their faces, he beheld this scene even as he knew that they would have him see it—himself, standing guiltily before them, with this naked figure at his right hand, whose feet they had watched him kiss. He saw her whipped with their shamed stares, a creature vile and pilloried—and he had believed them to be dumb with reverence.

So they stood there, for a moment, Robin with hot eyes, and Betty with her cheeks first scarlet and then white, while between them, in the center of the floor,

stood Judy's empty throne and the chair that held her gloves. It flashed upon Robin then that now, if ever, was the time for explanations, the moment for rehabilitating himself before their eyes. But then was it worth while? For now, with awakening eyes, with a blinding certainty, he saw between them something other than this wooden chair, these gloves, and the space of empty floor—something so dead that it might never have been at all.

There came a voice behind him, cheerful again, but self-reproaching.

"How silly of me!" it said; "I've left my gloves. I——"

Then it stopped, as though a sudden hand had been laid upon its owner's lips. No, they were none of them themselves to-night, for now Judy was white, too, even Judy. Robin went over to the chair and picked up the gloves.

"Yes, they're here," he said.

"How silly of me!" she repeated. He shut the street door behind her, Peter and Betty still standing in the other one.

"Is there anything I can give you?" he asked them. (He remembered afterwards that Betty had once put this question to himself—in a dream, wasn't it?) "Will you have some tea?"

But Peter made a movement with his boots upon the uncarpeted floor, and Robin held out his hand to Betty.

"Then perhaps——?" he suggested.

Presently he heard their feet upon the pavement outside, and their footsteps becoming fainter. He had hardly dared yet to turn his eyes again upon his Psyche; and now it seemed to him that she must be

cowering there behind him, stained irretrievably, cowering there in the dirt that they had flung at her, that at any rate they had assumed her to have sprung from. Poor little Psyche—could she ever be clean any more?

And then he saw his mallet lying idle at her feet.

CHAPTER XVII

WHICH RE-ECHOES A CHANSON OF RONSARD

It had been a wonderful thing to discover oneself in love, and although to be loved again (in just that way) must be to know what God and man is, yet there were hundreds of girls, poor souls! who had never even achieved the first part. But this—this was something so astonishingly different that it had almost beaten the color back from her cheeks.

“Couldn’t you guess, Margwet? Couldn’t you guess?”

Chris was trying to hold her hands, too, both of them in his big grasp.

“Didn’t you know?” he pursued. “Couldn’t you guess?”

Through present discomfort she became aware of several things at once, that it was already past six, for instance, the hour at which her father had promised to meet her, and that their train would leave Paddington at ten minutes to seven. If her father had only been here this would never have happened. But he wasn’t here, and Robin was shut up downstairs, working at his Psyche, and—well, anyway, it had happened. Guessed? Why, of course not; how could she possibly have guessed? And that was why she couldn’t, just for a moment or two, summon up bravery enough to look Chris in the eyes, to look higher even than his lowest waistcoat button, though she knew, somehow, that his cheeks were rather pink.

"I know I'm a wotter, Margwet," he said, "and not bwainy, and all that, but, but"—he swallowed once or twice (this hadn't been included in any of the rehearsals)—"but I love you, Margwet, I do weally [how jolly feeble it sounded, though]. I've always loved you, ever since you were a fat little nipper—so high." He lifted up her hands an inch or so, reminding her that she must pull them away from him as soon as possible. "You'll say you'll mawwy me? You *will* say you'll mawwy me, Margwet?"

And all the time the words that she must say were dancing about in her brain, in the maddest way imaginable, but shirked her lips unanimously.

"You *will* say you'll mawwy me?" he repeated.

Presently somebody, who wasn't herself, said rather foolishly (just as though some distant acquaintance had asked her to have a third help of pudding)—

"Oh, no, I can't! I really can't!"

She lifted her eyes, and looked at his face—poor Chris! although she could scarcely believe him even now.

"I'm so sorry," she went on; "but you—you mustn't, you know."

"Ah," he said, "I've taken you by surprise. You've never thought about it. But can't you begin to? Can't you begin to?"

He was still holding her hands, but just then there came a ring at the front-door bell, and she could take them from him. Looking at one another, they heard Mrs. Pollock move heavily along the passage into the hall, where, in a moment or two, they heard the sound of voices, questioning and answering. But she returned alone, and went back towards the kitchen without entering this room in which they were stand-

ing; so that the visitors, whoever they were (she told them presently that they were Mr. and Miss Wing, whom she had sent downstairs to Robin), must evidently have departed. Margaret's voice had become sensible again now, thank goodness!

"No," she said; "you mustn't talk like that, Chris. You mustn't, *really*. And I couldn't marry you, not if I thought about it for ever, and ever, and ever."

She smiled a little at this, because it might easily have sounded so rude. But Chris would understand, poor Chris, watching her forlornly from the wrecks of this long-planned scheme.

"Couldn't you love me a little bit?" he pleaded. "I'd do all the west, I would weally—couldn't you, Margwet, just a little bit?"

She held out her hands now, of her own accord.

"Oh, but I do," she said; "ever so much more than a little bit; only not quite in that sort of way."

Did other girls, girls in novels, she wondered, feel so *awful*, as they gracefully dismissed their unsuccessful suitors? But Chris still groped wildly after his vanished eloquence, with the happiness of a lifetime slipping away between his fingers.

"Is there anybody else?" he blurted out; and behold, here was all the blood in her body tumbling over itself to clamber to her cheeks.

"Why, of course not," she stammered, with truth in the dust, but self-respect, at any rate, superficially intact.

"Then p'waps," said Chris—"p'waps you might change your mind?" But she shook her head firmly, her cheeks still burning hot; and the little clock on the mantelpiece struck the quarter.

"I must go," she said; "I'll go to Paddington, and if Daddy comes, you must send him after me."

Chris leaned against the door with hungry eyes.

"Oh, Margwet," he said, "and you *weally* can't—can't even think about it?"

"Poor old Chris," she whispered, "I really can't."

He took her downstairs, and as they reached the landing below they saw that the front door of Jack's flat was standing open, as though some one had just left it in a hurry; and, as they passed by, there came out to them, rather faintly, but quite distinctly, five or six sharp sounds, as of metal falling upon stone, and following these a muffled crash, as of something rather heavy falling upon a floor. The oddity of it pulled them up for a moment, and it was then that Robin came out to them from the hall, holding his hat in his hand, and pushing past them, as if he had not noticed that they were there.

Chris caught him by the elbow.

"Hullo!" he said. "What the deu—what's up, Wobin?"

Robin stared at him for a moment.

"Oh, nothing," he said. "An accident, that's all," and pulling himself free, went out upon the pavement. And it was then, as they stood there puzzled, that Margaret saw through these two open doors the white ruin of the little Psyche. Running in, she knelt down in the dust, gathering up the pieces in her hands.

"Oh, what is it?" she cried. "What's happened, Chris? And she was so *sweet*!"

She looked up at him, her hands a cup for the poor remnants of one graceful arm; and he saw tears in her eyes, but more than tears. Bending down a little

he said, "Then there *was* some one else;" and at that they brimmed over from her eyes, these two tears, the first that he had ever seen upon her face. They brimmed over, and stood confessed upon her cheeks. Was she doomed, then, never to keep a secret, even the holiest?

Chris looked away from her quickly, turning his eyes towards the empty banker.

"Poor old Wobin!" he said; "but it wasn't an accident. Did you hear?"

She nodded her head; and now he might look at her again in safety.

"I'm sowwy," he said to her; "I've been wather a bwute to you."

Some day it would not be difficult perhaps to recall this evening from the past, and search it in vain for even the tiniest of tragedies; to lean back, with contemplative finger-tips, and discover, in all these foolish heroics, merely the brushing aside of a veil that must necessarily have disappeared in time, and the quite logical awakening of a very ordinary and inevitable giant from his unsuspected sleeping-place.

It would not be difficult then, in the light of a mellow understanding, to lay emphasis on the fact that, if no actual birthday can be reasonably expected to pass scot-free of pain, yet these fleeting pangs were as nothing to the tragedy that might have been. It would not be difficult then, perhaps; and even now, before his feet had carried him blindly half a mile from home, it must be supposed that some glimmering of this had made itself apparent to Robin's understanding. For he stopped short under a lamppost near the Marble Arch, and said—

"By God! supposing I'd married her before I knew."

Knew what? Ah, that was to be unfolded to him this evening, was already indeed beginning to force itself, as it were, upon his notice, a tiny undercurrent of revelation in this turbulent stream of emotion that was now hurrying his feet through these unrecognized streets—but only an undercurrent as yet and one that must play a very minor part to this bubbling torrent of alternate self-pity, self-reproach, abuse for these murdering Wings, with their red cheeks and cold, upbraiding eyes, lamentations for the poor victim of their horrible righteousness, the swelling up of remorse for those impulsive, shattering blows, and the swift assertion, in its wake, of a triumphant justification for the wild moment's deed. "Damn them!" he cried to himself; "damn them!" and meant it to the last torment of all possible purgatories, though he realized all the time that by to-morrow he would probably be praying for forgiveness. But then this wasn't to-morrow, this was now, this was now; and all the time there it was, if one stopped to notice it, this tiny, strengthening current whispering into his being "Behold, something has happened to you; behold, you are different; and behold, behold, you are free!" And, anyway—he stretched his shoulders, aware suddenly of a curious, deadening fatigue—anyway, it was all past now, if only just past, the Wings, Betty, the Psyche, these ardent, strenuous months, all of it, and might as well be forgotten as speedily as possible. That was what he wanted now, wanted more than anything else in the world, just to forget—an easy matter; and then, why, here it was all over again, full-tide, and in the same old order: commiseration,

remorse, bitterness, anguish, with forgetfulness last of all, a very fruit of Tantalus.

Presently he pulled out his watch, the first of a little series of incidents whose clear memory would lend a peculiar, deliberate quality to the further events of to-night, that would presently be hard put to it, perhaps, to shelve upon Circumstance alone the uneasy responsibility for all that was to follow. He pulled out his watch and saw that the time was about a quarter to eight. He would have been having his dinner just now, he reflected, upon any ordinary day, but to-night the very notion of food sickened him. He couldn't have eaten a mouthful, he told himself, even to save his life, although a curious chance had brought him to a halt almost opposite to Pinchetti's, in this side street of Soho.

It was another chance, too, though perhaps the idea had been already lurking in the back of his mind, that invited him from the top of a passing bus (diverted from its usual route, by a roadmending enterprise in a main street) to visit the Halcyon—the very place to forget things—and observe *La Belle Aurore*, whose last nights these were in London. It was a quarter to eight, and the doors would already have been opened, but he could, at any rate, take what chance there might be of finding a vacant seat; and, anyway, he must do something: he couldn't walk the streets all night, and besides he had promised Judy that he would come and see her before she went to Paris.

Judging the direction, he began to thread his way, with quick steps, among these dimmer streets, until presently he emerged quite suddenly into that very flaming heart of things over which, in a coronet of brilliants, the Halcyon announces its presence to the

night. And it loomed there this evening, and at just this moment, above such a clamoring, glittering conflict of cabs, and buses, and glossy, bright-lamped broughams, above such a resounding tumult of clattering hoofs and falling feet, of greetings, warnings, shoutings, and laughter, that a stranger, and even Robin himself, might well wonder how any one of these dainty ladies, with their white-fronted, tall-hatted escorts, could reach their revels in safety; or if, in all the world, there were any more dazzling acres than these that played carpet to London's pleasures. He had often been here before, of course, and even at this hour, but generally hitherto with a sense of half-pitiful, half-protesting aloofness (born doubtless of the Wings), and never, as now, when all that he asked was to be mingled with the crowd. With the crowd? Well then, with the dozen, hundred crowds, that were criss-crossing here upon their various paths of amusement, but would all, at some time or another (or such at any rate was its boast), be embraced by the catholic arms of the Halycon.

And that was why the Halycon might never stoop from giving of the best of its kind. It warmed itself at the empire's heart. It was the meeting-place of a score of frontiers, and its hands (and halls) must therefore never be empty; for which reasons then, observe to-night, among other attractions, spelt out in changing lights of red, and green, and gold, the magic words *La Belle Aurore*, concerning whom, if the bills at the entrance be read, it might be confidently asserted that she was giving the most daring, delightful, and artistic exhibition of modern times, that she had made herself the darling of America and was now exclusively engaged to afford entertainment to

the patrons of the Halycon. Wherefore, walk up, ladies and gentlemen, walk up.

A broad-chested commissionaire, with a military mustache and an imposing row of medals, swung open the glass doors for him, and lifted a dignified finger to indicate the box-office. But every seat in the house had been long ago sold, though Robin might find standing room, if he liked, in the promenade, which he could enter for five shillings, and where his lack of evening-dress would be unimportant.

Some acrobats were holding the stage as he came in, a light-hearted, graceful trio, who seemed, however, to create very little interest in such parts of the hall as were visible to Robin, though their agility was being loudly recognized by unseen applauders above. Nor were the seats below him, that filled the floor of the building from where he stood almost to the footlights, more than scantily occupied, so that at first he couldn't help wondering if the man at the door had deceived him, but remembered immediately that it was still comparatively early, of course, with half the prospective stall-holders lingering, no doubt, over their after-dinner coffee.

He leaned over the promenade rail, looking about him with curious eyes and a lessening preoccupation, and struck suddenly with a certain air of solid contentment that seemed to prevade most of the people who had already taken their seats—a contentment so well-fed, so bodily fit, and sure of itself, that, becoming desirable in his eyes, it began at last to extend itself towards him, very leisurely indeed, but as though somebody were laying strong, complacent hands upon his jangled consciousness.

He must remember, for instance, that after all he

had been restricting himself to a very-hole-in-the-corner existence for these many weeks past; that there were other things in life besides a three-foot Psyche on a pedestal, and that this forgetfulness for which he was clamoring (a little hysterically almost, eh? Come now!) wasn't a bit difficult of access, was even on its way perhaps—nay, might almost have arrived already. This undercurrent too, with its strange and vehement whisperings, it was swelling a little, wasn't it? becoming something more than an undercurrent, something masterful and persistent, for all that it would seem to have found its source in those reproachful, accusing eyes.

Somebody slapped him on the shoulder, "Hullo, Rivers!" and turning round, he beheld the healthy, genial countenance of an old schoolfellow.

"Just up from Aldershot," he explained. "Let me introdooce you, Mr. Rivers, Miss Carter." Miss Carter, a singular-looking young lady, in an expensive hat, bestowed her hand and a smile upon Robin, and proceeded to survey him, without shyness, through a pair of very violet eyes. At the same time she would seem, Robin noticed, to be sufficiently busy in exchanging nods and winks with quite a considerable proportion of the audience in the promenade. Presently she asked him what had brought him here.

"Rory, I'll bet!" said her companion.

"Rory?" puzzled Robin.

"Well, La Belle, then, if you're so particular, the French girl, English though really, they tell me."

"Scotch," corrected Robin. "Half Scotch and half French."

He found himself embraced, through a monocle, with a sudden access of interest.

"Hullo, I say! D'you know her then, what?"

Robin explained.

"By Jove, I say, you might introdooce me! Warm stuff, eh?" He gave Robin a dig in the ribs. "Oh, you old dog! I'd never have thought it of you. Isn't he an old dog, Louie?"

Louie said that still waters ran deep, and that people of Robin's personal appearance were often the "thickest." They had ranged up just behind him for Judy's turn, and Robin saw now that the stalls were full, becoming aware, at the same time, of a general lull in the conversation about him, broken only by a dialogue between his new acquaintances.

"Seen her before? 'Course I have, dozens of times. Oh, not bad, nothin' *in* it, you know——" The conclusion became inaudible to him, but Louie giggled, and her companion raised his voice a little.

"Yes, I would," he said; "I'd rather see you any night,"—simple words, but so spoken that now, in a flash, the last scales were snatched suddenly from Robin's eyes, so suddenly, indeed, that the dropping of them sent the blood, in a crimson rush, over his cheeks, and ears, and neck (Louie's breath was on his neck. Did she notice its change of color, he wondered?), and set him shooting furtive, comprehending glances over all these watching faces. And at first, with a sudden revulsion of feeling, he found himself asking, Did Judy know about all this? Because, if she knew, *if* she knew—but of course she knew. Why, everybody knew. Lord! how blind he had been. And now, by an odd chance, there darted back across his mind the memory of one of his old sermons, in which he had depicted for his listeners some such scene as this very one about him, held it up for them as an

illustration of that earthly dross for which so many would barter their everlasting welfare—God! how he began to hate himself now for those eloquent, ignorant sermons. Talk about the blind leading the blind—this had been a thousand times more grotesque. For this had been the blind shouting his second-hand platitudes to men and women who could see. And Lord! how blind he had been; so blind that only now, for the first time, had he become aware of this vast underworld, beneath the superficial crust of things, that was staring up at him, on every side, through its hundred eyes—eyes that were even human sometimes, and looked into his own with such a certainty of recognition that surely they must have been meant for him all along, only somehow he had never seen them till now, in just this sort of way. For now his feet were upon a new earth that was yet the oldest earth of all, that asked for no other heaven than perhaps a little darkness presently. But then again this wasn't presently, this was now.

And now, at the parting of the curtain, behold Judy herself, like an old friend confronted unexpectedly in a different continent. Or wasn't it Judy? By Jove, though, she was good! One might almost swear that she was a statue, set there, before all these people, so motionless, so contemptuous almost, and above all so marble-like, that when the curtains met again the whole audience was shouting and clapping with a genuine applause. Robin felt it to be genuine even here among these people at his elbow, to whom, as he now knew, the entertainment was at best a mere excuse for their foregathering; and when, a moment later, the curtains separated again to display her as one of England's best-known statues, it was to an

instantaneous storm of cheering, that must have made it difficult indeed to remain there so silent and inflexible. In any case there could be no doubt about her conquest, or any more complete a tribute to her success than this silence that presently fell upon the house before her seventh and last appearance.

For this was to be a new addition to her répertoire, and in consequence the curtains were remaining folded for a somewhat longer time. It was to be called Innocence, according to the program, and Robin found himself thrilling, during this tiptoe expectancy, with a sort of illogical, reflected triumph; but only for a moment, because now—or were his eyes lying to him?—because now she was standing there, posed and poised, with outstretched hands, not as Innocence at all, but just as she had stood for him three short hours ago. There she was, with the limelight upon her and all these staring eyes, standing up in a stillness so complete that he could hear his pulses galloping in his ears. For a second or two he gaped at her like the rest of them, like this woman behind him whose frock was brushing his shoulder; and then he could not but turn his eyes away from her, because this thing, this product of his own brain, that now stood parodied there, flaunting itself behind the footlights, was no more his Psyche than if his Psyche had never been, and yet was hideously the same, was some creature born of this pit in which he stood, a thing unnamable—too flagrantly evil for even such an audience as this.

And yet was it?

"By Gad!" said a solemnized voice behind him, "by Gad! talk about suppressin' her. Why, she's a bally sermon. I swear she is—a bally sermon."

And Louie was positively silent. A sermon? Good God! what had they mistaken her for? Not for——? He must look at the program again.

And by then, here was this whole audience risen literally to its feet, with the mute appealing figure, shut away from them by the curtains, still touching its easy emotions. Here it was, bellowing itself hoarse, and even wiping its eyes, with such a singleness of homage, that now this tottering barrier of his puritanism, ignorance, prejudice, or what you will, was so finally swept down that the giant within him, leaping out towards the giant without, proclaimed this victory of Judy's to be indeed his own as well. They didn't know, of course, these shouting people, that his had been the designing of this vision that had taken them by storm. But *he* knew—with shining eyes he knew that this was his own Psyche that had made them her slaves to-night; and yet something other than that old Psyche, since that, after all, had been merely the boyish embodiment of some dubious, abstract idea, whereas this—this was the body itself, warm, and beautiful, and fashioned for enjoyment; since that had been lifeless at best, a thing of marble, with crude hands outstretched to God, whereas this, that was still his own, that he had touched a hundred times, and never yet caressed, could give him pulse for pulse, was alive, and a woman, with her white hands stretched out towards himself.

"But I never saw you," said Judy in the cab. "Where were you?"

"At the back," he told her; "in the promenade."

She shot a quick glance at him. Then she did

know; had taken it for granted, of course, and—and didn't care.

"There weren't any seats to be had, you see," he smiled; "you're such a celebrity."

But Judy was leaning forward a little, and tapping with her fingers upon the top of the folding-doors, the April air blowing warm into the cab, as they swung round towards the Magnifique.

"When did you have your dinner?" she asked him.

"Not since yesterday," he said quietly. She turned round again at that, looking at him again. Then something had happened after all in the little scene that she had witnessed at the studio; and yet something (though she would have guessed otherwise) that did not preclude his sitting now at her side.

"You're overworking, you know," she told him.

"Never mind," he said; "it's finished now."

"Finished?"

He nodded.

"Right up," he said. They were clattering now into the paved fore-court of the hotel, and drew up, with a flourish, at the foot of the broad steps. A porter came down to them, touching his cap to Judy, and holding a wickerwork protector over the cab wheel as he helped her to descend. At the top of the steps she turned again to Robin with a smile.

"We'll have some supper in the grill-room," she said, "as you're not dressed. You don't mind my leaving you for a minute. My rooms are upstairs, and my maid has gone away for the night."

At this hour, towards ten o'clock, the large room where they would have their meal was very nearly

empty, and leaning across the table, Judy looked hard into his eyes.

"Now, tell me," she said, "have you forgiven me for cribbing your Psyche?"

"Did you?" he asked.

"Didn't you recognize her?"

"She wasn't down on the program."

Judy was a little flushed.

"Well, the—the other name——" she began, but Robin interrupted her.

"I could have told you a better one," he said.

"Blindness; and I'm glad she's gone."

"Gone? How do you mean?" she asked.

"There isn't a Psyche."

Her eyes widened.

"You've not," she cried, "you don't mean to say you've——"

"Yes, I have," he said. "Broken her up, smashed her—into thirteen pieces. Are you sorry?"

Even in this quiet room with its soft carpets and noiseless waiters, the cries of the audience, welcoming the new Psyche, were still echoing in his ears. But perhaps Judy was a little tired of applause. Perhaps she was a little tired altogether this evening.

"Why, I believe you are," he said; "I believe you are sorry."

"*Sorry?*" she said at last, her eyes still searching his face, with the same half-puzzled scrutiny. "Oh, it's cruel, it's cruel; but—won't you tell me why?"

He stretched himself lazily.

"Oh, I don't know," he said. "Why should I?"

She winced just a little at that, he saw for all her fame, as though he had turned to her lightly, and

reminded her that she was merely his model, after all, and why should he whisper his private matters in her ear?

"Ah, but you will," she said to him. "You must, Robin."

Must he? The color in her cheeks was becoming a shade deeper now, and her lips were parted. He had never seen her looking quite like this, never even when their comradeship had seemed closest.

"You *must* tell me," she insisted, yet not as one would speak a command.

"All right," he said, and told her over their supper, during which, by a curious reversal of circumstances, it was he who was hungry but thirstier than he was hungry and she who had no great desire to eat or drink. Presently she said to him—

"Poor Betty!"

"Eh?" he asked quickly. "What?"

She was drawing little patterns upon the tablecloth with her fruit-knife, finding herself possibly, indeed, no less surprised than Robin at her last remark. Because, of course, she didn't pity Betty a bit, and the system that Betty represented—her cheeks burned to think of it even now, as she had confronted it, for a second or two, four or five hours ago. And yet—

"Well, if you love her," she said.

"How could I?"

"Or had ever loved her at all."

"But I did!" he cried hotly. "Don't you see it was just that, just that——" then he cut himself short, still staring at her face. "No, I—by God, Judy! you're right. I never loved her at all. I was blind. I was a fool. I was asleep."

She looked up now, and saw in his eyes a look that she knew well enough, that she had seen very often lately—so often that she was perhaps beginning to regard it as a right.

"Lord," he told her, "it was worth a hundred Psyches to wake up."

The waiter permitted himself to drift towards their table; and this was the moment (and she knew it) when she should have given Robin her hand, laughed at his miserable, yearning eyes, and bidden him good-night. But just then her attention was caught by two other guests, a man and a woman, both young, and both more than commonly good-looking, who were sauntering obliviously by their table, in such an obvious satisfaction with each other and the moment that even the waiter perceptibly relaxed his expression of infinite boredom. And by the time they had gone Judy had forgotten that she had ever wavered.

"We'll take our coffee upstairs," she said, where they found themselves presently at a little table near the foot of the main staircase, upon the other side of which, tucked away behind some palms, the couple that they had seen downstairs was sitting comfortably ensconced.

There were other people here also, dotted about at ease; and at the more distant end of the lounge, half hidden from them by intervening tables, and big pots of hothouse plants, the violins were playing through their program—playing wonderfully well too, and just now with a curious, lingering rhythm that had evidently cast its spell over such listeners as they could see; though from others they could hear, every now and again, little puffs of talk and laughter, framed, as it were, in the *piano* passages of the score. Judy's

elbows were on the table and she was leaning forward a little, with her chin upon her hands.

"It was worth a hundred Psyches to wake up," he repeated. "Did you know I was asleep?"

She let herself meet his eyes again.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Why, this," he said quickly, "that for two months I saw you nearly every day, learned you like a fellow might learn a book, knew each little turn of your head, touched you even, and never,"—he paused a moment—"never knew that I loved you, Judy. I thought of you just as a—as a statue; and all the time,"—he took hold of her hand,—“all the time you were a woman.”

And now, by the last of the little chain of circumstances that would seem to-night to be compelling them together, the violins struck away into that old melody to which, long ago, she had once sung him a chanson of Ronsard. She had perhaps forgotten this, though Robin was to remind her, since for her this song reached back into a past to which this other was no more than yesterday, a past of bleak, early mornings, when she had set her little heart to the tune of it, beating time with her hands to chase the blueness from them.

This far it reached back, but must needs hold within its grasp such years as lay between—not altogether unhappy perhaps, if one looked at them as a whole, but then, was this all that one had a right to ask of Youth? For now, as they trooped back before her eyes, they made at best a sorry company, a gray company that even a prosperous to-day (so far as mere money went) could poorly justify; and yet, they were all of Youth that life had stooped to give her, dear

Youth, that came but once, and was so quickly gone, that was even now setting his hand to the door to shut himself away from her for ever.

They had left the melody now, the violins swinging off into a brisker interlude, as though some light-spirited troop of pilgrims had set gay feet upon an upward road; or thus, at any rate, they came to her, these new notes, like dancing steps upon a highway, a little breathless maybe, but only from too much joy. And was there anything, then, that Robin could give her, if she would let him, any wine that he could set to her lips that might, for this fleeting moment, snatch up for her one dazzling ecstasy of youth—was there? Then she shook her head.

"You don't mean it," she said to him.

"Mean it?" he cried. "Look at me. Can't you see how I mean it?"

Their feet were upon the mountain itself now, these confident, phantom feet, and the faces of the climbers smitten already with the sweet air of the summit. The music shrank and swelled, became suddenly staccato, as they strained upwards from one foothold to the next; another moment, and they would be astride the peak; another moment, and then—ah, the subtlety of it, here it was once more, the old, haunting, heart-dragging melody with Robin's white face staring at her across the table—

"Pour effacer mon émoi,
Baise moi,
Re-baise moi, ma déesse,
Ne laissons, ne laissons, ne laissons passer en vain,
Si soudain,
Les ans de notre jeunesse."

Si soudain—and no, they would never come back

any more. Robin was leaning forward now, with his eager, altered eyes; and her hands in his lay hot and unresisting.

"Ah, Judy," he said, "do you remember?"

So they besought her, his eyes and his white cheeks, and this calling, crooning melody; and yet, not they alone, but in them and through them a hundred such hardly possible, delirious, triumphant things, that of a sudden she snatched her hands away from him, and stood there bolt upright taking a deep breath, before she bent down to draw him to herself.

"Very well," she said quickly. "Why not?"

And so next moment she was gone, leaving him alone there, with a number that he would never forget burned deep into his brain, and the fingers of his right hand closed upon a key.

Yet, even thus, there came to him, for an instant, an incongruous vision of Betty; but of a Betty so little understanding that, for all her bended knees, she became merely a spur upon his pathway—a pathway that memory would shrink from, but one that seemed soft enough now, with the violins, as he went upstairs, dropped down into a lullaby.

CHAPTER XVIII

WHICH DISCLOSES AN UNLOOKED-FOR HERETIC

ON their way to the station Chris confessed to Margaret that he had persuaded her father to meet her at Paddington rather than at the flat as he had intended—a tacit deception that was now accounting, no doubt, for the latter's somewhat ashamed appearance, as he paced up and down the departure platform.

"Why, good Lord, Arthur!" said Broggers, turning up unexpectedly to meet this same train, "you look as if you had just stolen the next boy's chestnuts. What's up?"

Lomax discovered himself to be at something of a loss, unaware of the exact extent to which Chris might be presumed to have confided in his uncle, and humbly conscious of an entire lack of experience in the art of arranging marriages. He cast an anxious glance up and down the platform, but neither Margaret nor Chris was as yet in sight, so that, in the end, he had to face Broggers a little helplessly.

"Up?" he temporized; "up? What's up? Well, I don't know about anything being *up* exactly."

Nothing up? And a masterful young man proposing to deprive you of your only child? Oh, Mr. Lomax! And that was just what Broggers said, wagging a reproachful finger.

"Oh, Mr. Lomax! oh, you wicked old parson! and you know quite well that something *is* up." He

stared more seriously into his friend's face. "You wouldn't be angry if she married the boy, Arthur?"

Lomax brightened visibly, became, indeed, almost self-respecting again.

"Then you know all about it?" he asked.

"Know all about it? Of course I do. I've watched the symptoms, my boy, watched the symptoms—off his breakfast one day last year, or the year before, was it? clean off his breakfast, and talked about girls' eyes. That's how I first spotted it—girls' eyes, quotha, and he twenty-four, with the appetite of a zebra. Eh? You're not annoyed about it, Arthur, are you? I'd have told you before, only, as a matter of fact, the young rascal never told me, in so many words, till the day before yesterday. 'So I'm going to propose on Thursday,' says he, 'if old Lomax'll let me.' 'And your exam on Saturday?' says I. 'What's an exam?' says he. 'And, anyway, if she has me, I'll get thwough on my head; and if she doesn't, I'll want something to dwown my sowwow.' Will she have him, do you think?"

They were standing towards the front end of the train, and for a moment Lomax stared meditatively at the great engine, as it backed gently in to be coupled with the carriages. Then he looked slowly at Broggers.

"D'you know," he said, "I'm afraid I can't tell you." He frowned a little. "It's an odd thing, Broggers, but I don't believe I've ever realized till to-day that my own little girl was growing up with the rest of them, with nice boys likely to want her for a wife."

Broggers grunted.

"Grown up?" he said. "Well, I don't know

much about that. Grown up? Why, bless you, Arthur,"—he patted his stomach,—“I don't believe they know what it means. I don't believe——” then he cut himself short, because here, coming towards them, and not twenty yards away, was the young couple in question; and as he watched them his expression changed—changed from complacency to doubt, and from doubt at last to dismay.

“Oh, damn it all, Arthur!” he whispered, “they've been and messed it up.”

“Look here, I say,” said Chris solemnly, “old Wobin's been, and bwoke up his statue.”

And this was how Circumstance laid its trap for Broggers, because now he must needs change his mind, and, linking a crestfallen arm with his nephew's, go back with him to dinner, leaving a message with Lomax for his coachman to meet him at a later hour. This was how, also, they came to be standing together, an hour or two later, in Jack's studio, endeavoring to reconstruct, in Robin's absence, the events that had led to this little catastrophe. And it was thus that Betty came to them, pausing for a minute in the doorway; but a Betty so timid and altogether unfamiliar that at first they could only stare at her in silence, standing there alone in front of them, and asking them for Robin.

“I had to come back,” she apologized, excusing her loneliness and the lateness of her visit. “I had to come back. I wanted——”

Her words brought a sudden memory to Chris' mind.

“Why, of course,” he said, “you were here—Mrs. Pollock told us—you were here this afternoon, just

before——” he stopped abruptly, glancing at his uncle for a moment, and then staring back again at Betty; “of course,” he added.

They could see now that her eyes had turned away from them, searching the dimmer shadows about the sides and end of the studio; and, as they watched her in silence, the pucker deepened on Broggers’ forehead.

“Where is it?” she asked then. “The—the girl, Robin’s statue? And where’s Robin?”

Chris stepped aside to let her see, if she would, the little heap of fragments that they had gathered together under the gas-jet; but Broggers, going up to her, took her hands.

“We’re not quite sure about Robin,” he told her; “and the Psyche—did you like her, my dear? She was to have been his present to you, eh, Chris?”

But to behold two young women (and they the unlikeliest possible) in tears upon the selfsame evening, was a prospect that Chris found himself entirely unable to face, so that his uncle’s question fell merely upon a discreet, if ashamed, footstep in the passage outside.

“She was to have been a present to you;” and now Broggers saw that she was a little white.

“*Was* to have been? Then——”

He patted her hands once or twice, cursing fortune for having played him this scurvy trick, and promising himself an eloquent minute or two with Chris when he got upstairs again. For Betty wasn’t crying at all, not really (or only in her voice), but her eyes were boring the most uncomfortable holes in his heart that he could ever remember.

"There was an accident, you see," he explained. "I'm afraid"—he glanced down at the floor—"I'm afraid it can hardly be mended."

She took her hands away from him then, looking across at the empty banker, and back once more into his face.

"Are you sure," she asked,—“are you sure it was an accident? Because if it wasn't——”

"Well," he said, "if it wasn't?"

She looked at him steadily.

"It was my fault," she said.

Broggers went over and closed the door, setting a chair for her, and sitting down himself on a corner of the model's throne.

"Do you mind if I smoke?" he asked. "And won't you tell me all about it?"

But Betty wouldn't sit down, and stood in front of him as he filled his pipe.

"I'm afraid," she said, when she had told him, "I'm afraid perhaps you—you don't quite understand all this. But that was how—we've been taught. And at first, with my brother here, I—I was so ignorant, you see,"—she looked down at him,—“you don't understand, perhaps?"

He lit his pipe.

"Yes," he said, "I think I understand. But you've come back."

She smiled a little then.

"But that isn't very much, is it?"

"I think it's everything."

"Even when it's too late?"

Broggers stood up, holding his pipe in his hand.

"But, my dear girl," he said, "this isn't the end, it's only the beginning." He tapped his forehead.

"The boy's got lots more little Psyches in here, you may take my word for it, dozens of 'em."

She was silent for a moment.

"I think he has," she said at last, and now he could see a dull color creeping up into her cheeks. "But I'm afraid I wasn't meaning that exactly—at least, not altogether."

Broggers stared at her dubiously, and she held out her hand to him.

"Will you tell him I came?" she asked, and then, as she turned towards the door, he found that she had left in his hand her ring that Robin had given to her.

"But, my dear," he said, "my dear, you mustn't do this, you know. It's absurd. I won't allow it. It's ridiculous. You mustn't."

"Yes, I must," she said. He laid a hand upon her arm.

"You don't mean to give the boy up?" he asked incredulously.

"No," she said; "I don't think it's like that."

"But surely——" He looked down at the little ring in his pink palm, and then, with a sudden movement, held it out to her again.

"You must take it back again, Betty," he said. "Don't you see that you must take it back?"

But she shook her head, and even in this half-light he could see that now all her face was crimson as she stammered her reply to him.

"Only from Robin," she said, "if he thinks—if he thinks I'm worth it."

Her father and Peter were together in the study when she returned, and as she closed the front door

they called to her to come in. Her father came forward to meet her.

"Peter has told me all about it," he said kindly, "and you know how much I feel for you. But surely to go back again—and at this time of night. Why did you go, my dear?"

"I went to apologize," she said. There was a moment's silence, and Peter, who had been sitting in the writing-chair, swung round towards her with wide eyes.

"To *what?*" asked Mr. Wing. "You went to apologize!"

Betty took off her hat.

"I think we—I think I rather misjudged Robin's statue," she said. Mr. Wing glanced inquiringly at his son.

"Misjudged it?" he repeated. "Well, of course I haven't seen this—this figure that Robin has been spending so much time upon. But Peter tells me that it was obviously—that there was a—was a——"

"She was an old friend of his," said Betty—"of all of them, I think. I suppose she had been sitting for him. It isn't wicked to sit for people, I suppose?"

The furrow on Mr. Wing's forehead deepened a little. Surely he had defined his position in this respect more than once.

"Wicked?" he repeated, and Peter echoed the word, "wicked?"

There was another moment's silence, an interval long enough for a prayer to God that very definite guidance might be given in a father's dealing with his (no doubt) overwrought daughter. He laid his hand upon her arm.

"This isn't quite like you, Betty," he said gently.

"But even if it weren't wicked—and I don't for a moment say that it is, not for a moment—that's hardly the chief point, is it, that a Christian has to face?"

"You mean," said Betty, "that it's not for the glory of God and the good of His Kingdom?"

Mr. Wing dropped back into his chair, next to Peter's. "Not for the *greatest* good, my dear," he said. "And I'm afraid—I'm afraid that we've all noticed the change in Robin lately, and especially during these last two months. It's hard to serve two masters, Betty."

"Yes," she agreed. It was nearly eleven, and she had missed both tea and supper.

"I'm afraid," said Mr. Wing, "that this will make your future a little—a little difficult, my dear," then, something in her white face touching him, he leaned forward a little, "but not insuperably so; we must remember that there may yet—may yet——" He stopped short, catching sight, for the first time, of her bare hands and unringed finger. He looked up at her slowly.

"I think my future has settled itself," she said.

Half an hour later Peter faced her in her bedroom upstairs.

"Is your love for him dead, then?" he asked her straight out. "Because if not—if it isn't——" and she could see dawning in his eye some remarks, whose nature she could guess, upon the redemptive force of even an earthly love.

"Do you know," she said (it might be making herself very cheap, perhaps; but he probably wouldn't notice this)—"do you know that I don't believe I've ever known what love is, until—until to-night, perhaps. I don't believe we've any of us ever known.

We've never had time to learn. We've been too busy—too busy preaching. Why, it seems to me that we've just *lived* in pulpits, in separate little pulpits, even to each other, ever since we were children—preaching, preaching, preaching. And as for anything—anything real, or warm, or—or intimate, why, I believe there are scores of families, unconverted families, who know more about each other, and other people, and care more than we've ever done for all our—our prayers and sermons. When Ralph was killed, did we care, do you think? Did we really care? We wrote his biography, and dragged him into our addresses. But did we care? I don't believe we did. I don't believe we know how to. And that's why, when anything—anything rather human happens, we don't——" She looked at him in silence, for a moment, groping for the right word and not finding it. "And as for love," she went on, "I don't believe we've ever even touched the fringe of it."

Peter stared at her in an entire astonishment.

"I suppose you think I'm mad," she asked, "or backsliding?"

"But—but, Betty!" he gasped. "Anything human. What do you mean exactly? And love? Surely we—we love God, don't we?"

"Do we? We say we do, and we get other people to think we do, and we tell them often enough how to do it for themselves. But how can we love God if we've never loved any of His creatures? What standard have we got to go upon? And how can we learn anything about the love of God except by saying over and over to ourselves that it's so many billion times greater than some little concrete love in our own experience? And if there's never been any little

concrete love, what then? Oh, I don't mean a professional love, a sort of pumped up, evangelical interest, but an ordinary, humdrum, everyday, un—*understanding* sort of love. Why, I believe that the man we passed in the street this evening, using that awful language, with the little boy asleep on his shoulder, I believe he could know more about the love of God in half a minute, if only he knew where to look for it, than we've learned in all our lifetime. He had the unit of it in his arms; while we—well, we could have told him about the bigness of the whole, only somehow we—we've missed the unit,"—a strange speech, and sufficiently incoherent to justify Peter, as he went amazedly downstairs.

"Poor girl!" he said, "she's not herself to-night, and no wonder."

And, before her looking-glass, Betty knew quite well that this was exactly what Peter would be saying. And it would be true, too, wouldn't it? She wasn't herself; or—or *was* she? Was she to-night—for the first time in all her life, perhaps—really herself?

Then her glance fell upon a little pincushion that her aunt had given her for a present in the morning. And she remembered again that this was her birthday.

Alone in his armchair Chris stared dismally into the fire, and told himself that it was the devil. There was no other way of putting it. It was the devil; and yet not that Margaret wouldn't have him exactly, or even that he had failed to spot the truth by which now a hundred little incidents past had become so clear in his eyes; but the lamentable fact that, when at last the door of her secret had opened to him so obviously that he could not fail to see it, he must

needs put his clumsy foot in the chink, and shout aloud to her that he had discovered it at last.

"By—by George!" he said, "I didn't think it was *in* me to be a beast like that. I didn't, weally; and she the deawest, sweetest"—words failed him—"the happiest thought God ever had," he concluded, "put in the wippingest binding."

He reached out a hand for the Bradshaw, with a vague notion of going up to Cambridge to-night, though his exam was not until Saturday, the day, by the way, of the Academy Soirée, to which, if he could return in time, he had promised to accompany his uncle. But the last train had left Liverpool Street rather more than an hour ago; so that there was nothing for it but to smoke another pipe, and sit up for Robin, who came in a little after two. Chris nodded to the mantelpiece.

"There's a note for you from Bwoggers," he said; "and where've you been all this time?"

Robin looked at him curiously for a moment.

"I don't know," he said.

There had been a moment when he would have called it heaven perhaps, this place that he had been to. But now?

"I don't know," he repeated. "But I know where I'm going. I'm going to Paris."

Chris stared at him.

"To Paris?"

"Yes."

"Chucking up the business and all?"

"Yes."

Chris leaned forward and knocked the ashes out of his pipe.

"Are you going alone?" he asked.

CHAPTER XIX

WHICH MUST NEEDS CALL A SPADE A SPADE

THERE had been a moment when he would have called it heaven perhaps, this place that he had been to; a moment when his ears had been deaf to all other sounds than Judy's voice and this rising and falling lullaby, and his eyes blind to everything but the new fire that the moment had kindled in them both. He would have called it heaven perhaps, and more, if there had been time or desire to call it anything at all; but now, as he dressed himself slowly, and stared into the looking-glass, he knew that it must have been something less than this, because, howsoever he might force it from him, the price that he must pay must needs come back, and back, and back again to his mind. So it must have been less than this, even though, as his reason insisted, he would not have foregone it for all the Bettys in creation, or a hundred ignorant vows. And he would reach out to it again.

For this, at any rate, was clear, that yesterday had thrust away from him the old life so far that it had become now both futile and impossible, the merest fleeting episode, and as unreal as a dream—a dream in which Peter and Betty, his associates at the office and in his religious activities, resolved in a shadowy procession round the Psyche of his boyish imagination. And he could never go back to them, even if

he had not already pledged himself, nay, actually plunged indeed into this new life, the real life, hitherto unknown, and now the only issue possible; while the price—the price——?

“Damn them!” he said again presently; because now it seemed to him that but for the Wings, and this false position in which until yesterday they had contrived to set his feet, the price would by no means have been so great; if it were great. But was it? Was any price too great for this happiness, this—this freedom, that was now his? Happiness? Ah, if he could only have seen Judy now, even for half a minute, they would have melted like snowflakes, these tardy, questioning moments. But he wasn’t to see her until this evening; and there was the whole day between—a wilderness of such intolerable, lingering hours (for all that they were the first of his liberty) that this Friday would presently assert itself in memory as the longest of all his days, longer even than yesterday or that first day of his life in Highbury.

Once or twice, indeed, he was almost sorry that he had not gone down to business as usual, for Chris had gone to Cambridge by an early train (but with his last question unanswered); and it had scarcely taken him an hour to draw some money from his bank and book their seats, his seat and Judy’s, for to-morrow’s express to Paris.

And yet, in spite of the length of all these desolate hours, when at last he found himself turning down the Haymarket towards the restaurant where they were to dine together, there came over him a sudden odd wave of hesitation, that was less hesitation, perhaps, than the retreating from him of his desire in

the very moment of its fruition, as though somebody had snatched from his hands some physical prop upon which all day he had been leaning; so that now resolve, and resolve alone, must take its place.

It was only for a moment (he knew that quite well); and in the next, when Judy would be with him, it would seem to have been impossible. But here it was, something, that could be neither shyness surely, nor fear; and yet was something that would be willing to give a pretty good deal if only their lips might meet before their eyes.

And then, in a breath, it was all over, the first quick interchange of glances; and here was Judy opposite to him at the little table, with her face, that last night he had covered with his kisses, framed in the table-flowers. Presently she said—

“Are you sure—are you strong enough, Robin?”

“Strong enough?”

So he must fall headlong into them once more, all the hot vows of yesterday night—strong enough?

“And yet you don’t say them like you said them yesterday,” she told him.

“Don’t you believe me then?” he asked her.

“Don’t you believe me, Judy?”

She was silent for a moment, and then as her eyes drooped from him he bent forward.

“Ah, you do!” he cried. “You *must*. And you will come. You are coming.”

He saw that her fingers (over which Bob had labored so clumsily in his studio at Wrayley) were playing round the stem of her wineglass. And then, after a long time, she looked up at him again, looked into his eyes, and without wavering.

“Who’d lose most, if I didn’t?” she asked.

But he wasn't to come to the Halcyon to-night to see her last performance, because now, if she knew that he were among the audience, it would make her nervous. So he went back again to Bayswater. What a woman she was though, he told himself, so glorious one moment, and so afraid the next; and only a day ago, a day ago—and then, here they were, all over again, on feet of lead, the age-long, sullen minutes of each waiting hour.

And on Saturday morning Betty came to him, partly because Broggers' note, propped up against a pewter mug, still rested unopened and overlooked, and to prove perhaps (though he would never know it) that Robin was not the only one for whom Friday had spelt at least a hundred years. So please, she had come—she held out her hand to him, as he stood gaping at her from the middle of the room—she had come, because she felt that she must apologize in person, although, no doubt, he had already received her message. But Robin shook his head. No, he had received nothing. Betty reddened a little.

“But I—I left it with Mr. Brogham.”

Then Robin remembered, and went across to the mantelpiece; and as he opened the envelope the little ring fell out, and lay between them on the table.

“Give it back to her,” wrote Broggers. “She's worth a dozen of you.”

Betty was rather hot now, because all this, the finding of the ring, and the—well, whatever he did with it—should have been over long ago. But now it lay between them on the table. Robin tore the note in half, and put the pieces on the fire behind him.

"I thought," she said—"I thought it was better like that."

Robin looked at her for a moment, half puzzled, He had taken all this for granted, whereas, of course——

"Yes," he said; "I see."

But it may perhaps be set down on a credit side, that was inclined to wane a little, that in truth he didn't see at all.

"And I—I'm sorry that you broke your Psyche."

He began to feel that Broggers was right. He had known it all along, of course; and love indeed (or that for which he had mistaken it) had made him tell her so a hundred times over. But now, when he was aware that there had never been any love at all, his reason still found the saying true.

"Oh, that's all right," he muttered.

She lingered for a moment.

"Perhaps," she said—"perhaps—some day—you'll make a better one?"

Would he? Was he going where this was possible?

She held out her hand to him, a cool hand, he noticed. Really, she wasn't behaving half badly.

"Good-by," she said.

And if it had been possible for the Wings, and all that they stood for, to have commended themselves again to him just now, it would have been in this manner of Betty's coming and going. Yet instead, when she had gone, it occurred to him merely that here was but another step upon this road that he had chosen, the brushing aside of what might perhaps have been some sort of obstacle.

It was receding from him very fast now, this old life—so fast that in a moment it would become in-

credible to him, even as a dream. And it was because of this, no doubt, because now, after the lethargy of yesterday, each little incident of to-day was like the quick snapping of locks behind him, that the hours were flying away so breathlessly; so that whereas yesterday he had been as a journeyer over a waste of dragging sands, to-day he was being pushed headlong down some unclimbable descent. In the evening, too, as if to emphasize this further, there came a telegram from Chris saying that he was spending the week-end at Cambridge; so that when next he met him, if they did meet, it would be as the declared dweller in another world. His heart was galloping a bit now. It was a big thing, this. He moved restlessly about the room, his packing finished, and Mrs. Pollock already setting the dinner for the two of them, that they would share before they drove together to Victoria Station. Yes, it was a big thing; and the price of it—what exactly was the price of it?"

He opened the window a little way, and his ears became alert to every hoof-beat in the road outside; and then, without hoof-beats at all, here it came, her knock at the front door, peremptory as Fate, and—

"Now there *was* a time," panted Broggers, slapping his chest—"there *was* a time, when I could take three stairs at a go, three stairs at a go, my boy, in a coat, overcoat, top-hat, trousers, and a fancy waistcoat; while in pyjamas, in pyjamas, my dear Robin, you should have seen me in pyjamas. Talk about shooting arrows into the air. Eh? You're looking a bit pale, my boy, pale. And where's Chris?"

Robin's hand on a chair-top was shaking in spite of itself.

"Chris?" he said. "He—he's at Cambridge. He's up for his exam."

"I know," said Broggers; "but he's coming back to-night for the Academy crush."

Robin's brow cleared a little.

"No, he's not," he said. "He isn't really. He's just wired. He's staying up for the week-end."

Broggers began to remove his overcoat with a terrible deliberation.

"The scoundrel!" he said; "and he told me to come here and dine with him. And we were to go on there together." He glanced at the table. "Eh? You weren't expecting me by any chance, I suppose, were you?"

Robin was still standing a little between Broggers and the table.

"No," he said quickly. "I—I'm awfully sorry. But I'm expecting a friend. I——"

Broggers paused with one arm still enveloped in his ulster.

"Will he mind me?" he asked; "or——"

And then here was Judy herself, more glorious than ever, though perhaps a little white, and clad, as Robin saw, for their journey.

Broggers shook himself free, with a genuine pleasure, and held out his hands to her.

"Why, Judy, my dear," he said; "and to think that I haven't seen you for—how long is it?—eighteen months; and all your blushing honors thick upon you, eh? But I don't know, though. I don't believe you're quite rosy enough, you know." He looked

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from her face to Robin's—"Or is a country bumpkin too critical for town complexions?"

Would Judy never smile? Robin wondered. He held his breath for a moment; and then, thank goodness! her lips relaxed a little.

"Yes," she said; "I think you must be, Broggers."

Mrs. Pollock brought in a third tumbler and plate.

"I'm afraid," stammered Robin—"I'm afraid it's a jolly rotten dinner."

But Broggers had already made himself comfortable.

"Better a dinner of herbs where love is," he quoted, "than a fatted something—how does it go?—and contention therewith. Whereas this excellent roast beef could give points to any vegetable mess that was ever invented, eh? Thank God for beef, that's what I say; and the devil run away with the vegetarians."

He broke off suddenly, and twinkled across at Judy.

"And how's the Halcyon, my dear?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"I've done with the Halcyon," she said.

Broggers took a pull at his beer.

"Finished right up?" he asked then.

"Last night," she said.

"And what's the next thing on the program?"

Judy glanced at the clock.

"I'm going to Paris," she said. "To-night."

Broggers beamed.

"To-night?" he cried. "To-night, eh? And this is a little farewell dinner, then? A stirrup cup?" He raised his glass.

"*Santé*, my dear!" he said. "*Et—bon voyage*,"—and yet afterwards, though it was seldom perhaps that he allowed himself to think about this time, Brog-

gers knew that, even by now, he had become aware in himself of a certain vague uneasiness, of the presence in this little room of some brooding and shapeless trouble. But it was not until Mrs. Pollock brought in the coffee that its nature became in the least degree manifest to him. And then she told Robin that the carriage was waiting below, and that the man had come for his boxes.

"Hullo!" said Broggers. "Then you're off too?"

Robin bent over his coffee for a minute.

"Yes," he said; "I'm going as well."

"Though not to Paris, I suppose, eh?"

For a moment (or an age) there was a silence; then he said—

"Yes, I'm going to Paris," and for all the whirling in his brain, and though Judy was here at his side, could think of nothing more to say than that.

And it was thus, in the stillness that had dropped upon them, that the full truth broke suddenly upon Broggers; but a truth at first so entirely unthinkable that he could only sit there, staring at them, from one to the other of them, with open mouth, in a kind of dumb stupidity. Once or twice he would have begun to speak to them, but could say nothing at all; and then, at last, just as though they had been children whom he must forbid to paddle because the water was too cold, he could only say to them—

"But—my dears—you—you can't, you mustn't, you——"

"Why not?" said Robin, lifting his head.

"Why not?" Broggers was a little more himself now. "Why not? Why, how can you? She"—he glanced at Judy—"you—you're a married woman; and, besides,—it's impossible, it's impossible."

He pushed back his chair from the table, Judy still staring at the white cloth and playing with her coffee-spoon, and Robin, flushed now, and with the glamour upon him full-tide, standing upright at her side.

"It's impossible," he repeated. "It's utterly, absolutely impossible. Can't you see that it is?"

And yet if they wouldn't see, what could he do? Did they know that he could do nothing at all, that they could brush him aside just as easily as he was lighting this cigar? Damn it, though, it wasn't so easy after all, for somehow he couldn't get them together—the cigar-end and the flame. Never mind, he would have his smoke a little later on. But surely they must see that this thing was impossible, that it would be the negation of a lifetime, of both their lifetimes, of a clean and healthy boyhood on the one side, and of a womanhood on the other that could have compromised for Dubroullé perhaps, but never for itself. And what of Robin's—well, whatever had happened to him on that night in the Bayswater meeting-hall, inexplicable to Broggers, but surely, whatever it was, immeasurably the opposite of this life that was now to be?

"But your people," he said to Robin. "Your mother?"

"Look here," said Robin huskily,—“look here, Broggers, there are some things that—that a fellow has got to decide for himself alone.”

Broggers was silent for a moment. Then he said slowly—

"By himself, maybe; never *for* himself—not alone, at any rate. There are always the others, you know."

The clock was at the quarter now, and Robin was for going to the door, but Broggers, moving between,

held him back for a minute, with Judy still sitting at the table. Presently she spoke for the first time.

"And love, Broggers?" she asked. "Hasn't your law any room for it?"

Broggers had got his back to the door now, one plump fist resting on the handle.

"Love," he said. "If it were Love that were uniting you two—God knows! But is it?"

He came a step nearer to them.

"Is it?" he repeated, and then, when they were dumb, "Ah, don't you see," he said, "don't you see what lies before you, if you go on?" He held out his hands to them. "Won't you believe me?" he asked. "Haven't I known you both all your lives? Don't I know that you—that you're whole kingdoms too good for this—this sort of life that you're thinking of; that it would be hell for you both inside a month? Won't you believe me? Or, if in the end you must go on, can't you wait a little, a day or two, a week, and count the cost again, think it over, find out if it's really worth it?"

Through the open window they could hear the horses outside stamping impatiently upon the roadway. There was not very much time. He turned to Judy.

"The old days," he pleaded. "Don't you see how this would darken them all for ever?"

"If you knew," she said, "how dark they have been sometimes, Broggers."

"But not like that," he told her quickly. "Never like that."

Never? For a moment she glanced involuntarily at Robin. Never? But if Broggers knew the truth? And now, though with both hands she had fought it

from herself, declaring again and again that she obeyed no standard, and lived for the moment only, now the Truth had mastered her at last. And she must look it in the face. And she must call it by its name. And she must behold her flimsy pleadings torn in threads before her eyes. And she must say to herself, What is left of me?

She knew now how she had come to this; that two years ago this would not have been possible; that the first false step had been deliberate, not false, perhaps, for anybody else, nor even false, on the face of it, in itself; but false for her—and yet deliberate. So what was left of her? What was left of her?

The minutes crept by.

"If he were a son to you," said Broggers then; "and you might have had a son."

And then at last she lifted her eyes again to Robin's.

"Yes, he's right," she said slowly. "He's right, Robin. We've been down into the mud, you and I. And we"—she caught her breath a little—"we've got to get out of it again."

Then she rose to her feet, and went across to him.

"It's no good," she said, "we've got to get out of it, Robin," and then, suddenly, seeing his white face (and perhaps unwisely), she bent forward and kissed his forehead; yet not so quickly but that he could catch her wrists, and hold her so, for a minute, while he called her name.

"Judy, Judy!"

And then, behold, she was gone from him, and he was alone there, staring at Broggers; yet even already, and for all the tumult in his heart, not at Broggers alone, but beyond him, dimly, to some remote and

shining presence that only now did he perceive to have been withdrawn from him—from them both, perhaps—whose name was Peace.

“And your boxes, sir?” asked Mrs. Pollock, in the doorway. “He’s been an’ left your boxes behind, sir.”

Broggers was putting on his ulster.

“Never mind,” he said. “You can send them after us, to-morrow. We’re going home.”

CHAPTER XX

WHICH DABBLES WITH CREEDS AND THINGS

IF there had thus come a moment in this little narrative (and to prove its artlessness) that was fairly bursting with its moral, why here, as Broggers perceived, was the very man to hatch it out—a beneficent third party (sent straight from Heaven, as Broggers presently assured him), curled up in the far corner of a third-class smoking carriage, and on his way back, as he explained, from an Annual Meeting. He was the very man, only he mustn't begin just yet, not indeed until he had had three words with Broggers, and only then with the extremest possible precautions—all this, in a portentous wink, that a lifelong intimacy with the winker enabled Lomax to interpret with less difficulty than might have seemed probable.

But it was an odd journey, nevertheless, demanding the production of great quantities of tobacco-smoke, even though the night air had been never so sweet before. Yet how sweet it was, blowing in to them through the open window in imperative gusts, as if, for all the world, it knew itself to be the bearer of to-morrow—the latest come of all the world's May mornings.

Broggers put his head out once or twice, sucking down big lungfuls of it, as it ruffled what remained of his hair, and swept past him into the carriage behind.

"With our backs to London too, thank God!" he said, as the starlit fields began to creep about the

carriage-wheels. And at Wrayley he persuaded Lomax to come back with them to Whinchurch for the night.

"You've finished your sermon, you know," he said, "and we'll give you an early breakfast"—so that presently, with Robin away for a minute, the tragedy could be told; only half of it, of course (though Lomax might guess, perhaps, at something of what followed); and Broggers delivered himself with some heat.

"I mistrusted 'em all along," he said. "The fellow's first letter, do you remember, about the temptations of Youth, and the pure home life—well, that made my gorge rise; and subsequent events have justified the feeling. I tell you, Arthur, these people possess none of the reticences that make for decency; they bring up their children under religious cucumber frames, and go through life in spiritual blinkers; therefore they have one vista, and ignore the other two hundred roads that lead to Heaven."

"But they have a vista," put in Lomax.

"Very well, then, I'll grant you that, and also that blinkers may be essential to their style of beauty. But what I can't stand, Arthur,"—he thumped the table with his fist,—“what I can't stand is the perpetual shouting that their own particular vista is the only one; and the thought of all the poor children (like Betty) who must be born again if their souls are ever to grow any bigger; and the thought of the boys (like Robin) cajoled into a genuinely false emotion, and then taught that it's a special miracle from God, a miracle to which they must not only subjugate their modesty, but deliver up their temperament in bonds. And I tell you, Arthur, that for every one whose feet

they set upon a rock there are a dozen that they push towards the pit."

Lomax looked at him thoughtfully.

"Do you think so?" he asked. "To what they call the pit, perhaps. But not really, Broggers——"

Broggers shook his head.

"Yes, really, Arthur," he protested. "To *the* pit, if there is such a thing."

Lomax was silent.

"But she came back, in the end, you said," he suggested presently. "Betty came back."

"So she did," said Broggers. "She came back, God bless her! And it's not Betty that I'm haranguing about. She's emerging. It's the System that made her, and that would like to break her heart. But it won't."

"No, it won't," agreed Lomax. "But it'll hurt a bit."

"She's a fine girl," said Broggers. "She's taught me a lot."

"Will they make it up?"

Broggers shook his head.

"A boy's fancy," he said. "And it's over. And yet,"—he went over to the sideboard and poured himself out some whiskey,—“do you know what she said to me, Arthur? Do you know what she said to me as she stood at the door there, and wouldn't take back her ring? She didn't say it in words. But her eyes said it, if ever eyes have said anything at all——” He paused.

"Well?" asked Lomax.

Broggers sipped his whiskey slowly and set down the glass upon the table.

"‘What's this dull town to me?’" he quoted soberly.

"But they gave you something," said Lomax to Robin. Robin was silent. The Wings seemed so far away. But of course Lomax knew nothing of all that had ensued upon the breaking of the Psyche.

"And the best thing of all," he added gravely.

"How do you mean?" asked Robin.

"Don't you see?"

Robin thought for a little while, staring into the fire.

"If it were true," he mumbled presently. Then he looked up.

"Do you know what I used to think myself?" he asked. "I used to think myself the child of God in some rum sort of special way. And now,"—he stopped for a moment,—“now I'm only an animal after all.”

Lomax lit himself another cigar.

"And know it?" he inquired.

"How can I help it?"

"It seems probable that the other animals do, though."

Robin looked at him seriously.

"I don't think you quite know what I'm driving at," he said. "Broppers couldn't tell you, of course. He doesn't even know it all himself. And I can't tell you either. But——"

"Never mind," said Lomax. "Let's say there was a cropper. They're not uncommon, you know."

"But not like this," said Robin. "Because—do you know what I first thought God wanted me to be? I used to think that He meant me to be a—a sort of street evangelist, you know. Well, that lasted for a bit; and then, somehow, I drifted out of that, used rather to dread talking at meetings and things, and asking people about their souls, and then positively

hated it,"—he stared at Lomax,—“and now, of course, I could never do it again, never.” He stopped again. “Well, then, I felt a bit rotten about that but tried to persuade myself that God meant me to be an artist—a sculptor. I suppose that was just because I enjoyed doing it.”

“Not a bad reason, eh?” suggested Lomax.

“And now”—Robin stood up, and went over to the mantelpiece—“now I can never be that either.”

“Why not?”

“Because—don’t you see?—because it was down that road, sort of, that I—that I——”

“Tumbled?”

“Worse than that.”

“Into the dirt, perhaps?”

Broggers had gone to bed an hour ago—it was nearly three o’clock—and the old house lay quieter than sleep; so quiet that its greatest noise became now the ticking of the mantelpiece clock.

“Deep,” said Robin,—“so you see what I mean.”

Lomax shifted himself in his chair, and looked up at him.

“Ah, but I don’t,” he said; “why should you give up your art?”

“The Psyche,” said Robin,—“I thought it was they—Betty and Peter—who had blackened her. But it wasn’t. It was I.”

“But if your chisel slips once, do you throw it away or dig potatoes with it?”

Robin hesitated.

“No. But my chisel would be only a tool,” he said.

“And what’s your body and brain and the rest of it, in the hands of your soul, in the hands of the Thing, whatever you like to call it, that can say I

will and I won't (or at any rate within the limitations of its instrument); and turn its eyes towards God?"

"Well?" said Robin.

Lomax smiled a little.

"Well, then, if your bodily habitation, my dear boy, is mostly a sort of human chisel, as it seems to be, why go and dig potatoes with it, because once your soul has mismanaged it? It's not as if you had a choice of weapons, you see."

"You mean——" began Robin.

"I mean," said Lomax, "that our business is not to remake ourselves, but make the absolute best of what God made."

"If God made it," said Robin at last.

But had He? Or could He, at any rate, ever own to it again? It was so easy for Lomax to talk like this—Lomax, who had probably never wallowed at all. But what of himself? For though Broggers might doubt the presence of a Pit, Robin *knew*. And now, as he went out of the house, in this still hour before sunrise, he saw that he had known it all along, known it since the first wilful plunge that had seemed then so fierce and sweet and greatly to be desired, that seemed loathsome now to an almost physical nausea. And in the Pit he had lived for three days and nights; so that this morning his whole being lay soaked through and through with its blackness. There was not any of him clean. And how could he face the daylight any more?

He had set his back towards the river now, and found his feet upon a little track running westwards along the wooden fence of the park, towards the Deerlock Woods and the villages beyond. Upon his left,

but hidden from him by the steepness of its bank, lay the river; and upon his right stretched the upward swelling of a field of young wheat, a sheet of pale green, losing itself presently in a trail of vapor, and bordered eventually by a fringe of beeches.

Presently, as the day grew, innumerable little details, the absence of wagons upon the road or teams upon the land, a conspiracy of stillness, would proclaim this day to be Sunday. But now the stillness was as the stillness of any dawn in spring, dropped down upon the first, unanimous outpouring of song, but still threaded with bird-calls, by turns contented, and busy, and sheerly ecstatic. Other sounds were in the air, too, little unnamable noises, the shy businesses of a thousand deft hands, that must be complete before the sun had found the valley. These would be the servants of the palace, first-risen, tiptoeing with brush and duster, while their Master lay still asleep, his quiet breathing bidding them hurry unheard. He looked up into the sky, still pale but flawless, and arching like a great crystal above his head; and it seemed to him that upon this whiteness he alone was standing like a blot.

Presently the path dropped down into a little gully of saplings that declined towards the river, and opened there upon the keeper's cottage, with its garden behind. And now he could see the river itself, unruffled, and with the mists dissolving slowly from its surface. He swung his stick against the nettles, as he climbed again into open ground, the river shut away from him by the hedge on his left hand. Could he ever look daylight in the face again? Ten minutes later, and the field that he was skirting would have been lying in the full dazzle of its first sunshine; but

now it stretched away from him in a kind of subdued luster, as though, like all this cold dawn about him, it had read the secret on his countenance, and shrunk away from his passing feet. Yet, if it would not have him, if he must for ever remain an outcast from its stainlessness, could he go back again to that other, to the tawdry life that for three days and nights had claimed him for its own? Could he? Ah, if he might be clean again, only this once; if this terrible purity of God might yield for just one tiny moment and lift him from his mire. But could it? "Though your sins be as scarlet"—the words came back to him, but as words alone, and empty of truth, for all his sermons to which they had played the text. And yet if the words *were* true, if they *were* true?

And then an odd thing happened, that was not really odd at all of course, though it assumed now a quite exaggerated importance. For suddenly, and in a strange contrast to the cold peace of this growing day, there fell upon his ears a little series of sounds, at once impotent, and bitter, and terrified, that brought him first to a standstill, and then took him off the path a little, towards an outlying belt of the Deerlock trees.

And here, caught by a wire noose, he found a hare rolling and plunging in the grass, and tugging vainly at its bleeding leg. Seeing him, it even cried, flinging itself away from him then in a breathless delirium, but held fast as much by the beautiful, delicate strength of its own tendons as by the wire that had slipped itself about them. Stooping down, he succeeded in catching it at last, holding it under his coat, with its ridiculous, galloping little heart beating against his own, as he loosened the wire from its leg.

"You little rotter," he said, looking down into its

timid eyes; and then, holding it for a minute between his hands, he let it bolt away from him, fleeter than the wind, for all its wounded paw. But when it grew well again, as it would very soon, would it be caught like this any more? he wondered.

And so, as he still knelt there in the wet grass, there came to him the question, what if God too should have a breast for silly little souls in traps, and hands to set them free—what then?

And it was then that the great miracle happened, had happened indeed already, although he had not noticed it. For now, as he raised his head, behold the whole valley where he knelt gathered up into glory, lifted (and himself with it) into warm arms, and kissed upon its forehead—a miracle indeed, that was yet of course no miracle at all, even though it had come perhaps with a prayer.

Many things began presently to grow clear to him; that the old prophet had been right, for instance, more right than he knew, perhaps (or had he too been down into the Pit?); other things as well—a certain not exactly spurious but unreal quality in those first convictions of his that had been the triumph of the Wings, but were as nothing to this crying from the abyss that God had heard and answered for him to-day; and were yet, in some odd way, its devious forerunners.

So he went up the hill at last (the little hill above Deerlock), knowing, and with a conviction at once saner and more deep than knowledge, that Lomax had spoken the truth to him, Lomax and the poet whom he had quoted. And from the top he saw now no magical lights in the east, no flaming vision of a proud and opulent future, no horizon, indeed, more distant

than the next day's march. Yet he knew himself, even as Lomax had suggested, hands, and eyes, and brain, the tool of an immortal spirit. For the tool, as it had been handed to him, the product of a thousand ancestors and unseen forces, he was not responsible. It was of the earth, earthy. But in the work that it performed he might stand side by side with God—a thought at once great and humble; humble, because now, in this new spiritual democracy, his work, howsoever it were praised of men, might be in no whit more supreme than that of Hodge, down there in the valley, driving up the cattle from the pasture; but great, because thus the highest possible lay before them both.

And how clear the air was; so clear that down below him, in the little garden beyond the river, he could even see his mother, risen betimes and out among the flowers—the first figure to greet his eyes, in this new world that was the old, if not perhaps actually the first to meet him. For this happened to be Margaret, with her towel round her neck, coming down across the meadows for her bathe.

She didn't seem particularly surprised to see him, and he was glad of this, though presently perhaps he would tell her a little of what had happened to him—a very little. Instead she said—

“Hullo, I'm going for a dip!”

Then she looked at him meditatively. “There are still some of your old things in the boat-house,” she added. “Why not come too?”

And as he looked at her, he saw that in all the world there could be no better a thing to do than this.

“Why not?” he said.

CHAPTER XXI

SED REVOCARE GRADUM—

HE had seen the way out. There might still be before him the way of a man. God had told him so; and he knew it to be true. But the mire of the Pit was still upon his limbs; and not all the freshness of this spring morning, or his baptism of cold Thames water, might restore him clean to the world from which he had dropped. In time perhaps, in the long years, he might reach up to it once more. And yet, even then——

Esther held out her hands to him, and asked no questions; and even when he did not kiss her, there was no shadow in her eyes that he could see. Robin's women-folk were being kind to him to-day.

Presently he bent over the breakfast-table. "Look here, mummy," he said, "I've got to clear out. I can't tell you why. But I must go. I oughtn't even to be sitting at this table really. And I must go away."

"Poor old Robin," she said.

He looked up at her quickly.

"You mustn't say that," he told her. "You wouldn't say that if you knew all about it. I've got a little money, you know, enough to keep me for a year or two, and I shall go to Italy. If I don't do any good there—I shall try all I know—but if I don't, I shall have kept a ten-pound note up my sleeve, and I shall go to Canada."

"Tell me," said Esther then, "does anybody know about your trouble?"

"Nobody knows it all," he said; "but Broggers and Lomax know a little."

"Have you told them that you're going away?" Robin thought for a moment.

"No," he said, "I don't believe I have. But I feel sure that they would say I was right."

"When do you want to go?" asked Esther.

"To-day," said Robin, "if I can manage it."

"And for how long?"

"For a year at least—perhaps more. I don't know." She packed his bag for him.

"And I'll have your London things sent on to you. I suppose you'll let me hear your address?"

"I wonder," said Robin impulsively, "if you know what an absolute ripper you are."

Yet he tried to go away without kissing her.

"But not for a whole year?" reproached Esther.

"If you knew," he said again. But she drew down his face to her lips.

"Never mind," she smiled, "I think I'll risk it."

CHAPTER XXII

AS IT WAS IN THE BEGINNING

OUT of a thousand comments that could very easily be cited upon the entire unimportance of the foregoing narrative there might perhaps be found one in the fact that even, in its most poignant moments, the ten-past trains to Highbury (that only stop at Dalston Junction) had left Broad Street with an unruffled punctuality. From platform number five they had started, even as they had been accustomed to do long before Esther had searched for them in her Bradshaw and found them unfamiliar; and finished their journey, some ninety minutes later, at the Mansion House.

In foggy weather, it is true, there might have been a transient disarrangement of this program. But for the most part, and to the humiliation of our drama, they had jolted as peaceably upon their travels as now, three years after Robin's departure to Italy, they were continuing to do, with a sort of cosmic impartiality that might almost have been cynical, if it hadn't, on the whole, been rather comforting.

At any rate, Betty had found it so, though probably unconsciously, voicing itself as one among the innumerable minor details of her world's economy, that were willing enough (if she would only let them) to welcome her back from her little excursion into Romance, and assure her that, so far as they were concerned at least, her position among them remained unaffected. And this was comforting, if only to a certain

limited degree, and after a rather bustling and indifferent fashion, as though they said to her, "We haven't got a halfpennyworth of sympathy with all these high-falutin', sentimental notions of yours; and if you've come a cropper over them, well, that's your lookout. But here we are, if you like to come back to us, ten past the hour, Broad Street to the Mansion House; and if you're half a minute late, we shall start without you."

And to-day, as it happened, she *was* late, so that the above message might only be waggled to her by the departing buffers, through an altercation that was taking place at her side between a perspiring city magnate and the bland official at the barrier. She might have listened to a similar one at almost any time during the last three years or so.

"Damnable!" the old gentleman was panting, "that's what it is; nothing less. I was waiting here for one minute, I tell you, for a whole minute, with the train in there as still as a corpse. I was here at nine minutes past by your own clock. I could have caught it a dozen times over—a dozen? Twenty, sir. I shall report you, sir. I shall report you to the Directors—for obstruction, sir, obstruction. It's preposterous. It's——"

At this point, however, his indignant attention was caught by the amused eyes of a somewhat ascetic-looking clergyman in a like predicament; and for a moment or two he wavered between abuse and apology, compromising at last midway between the two.

"Very sorry, sir," he spluttered; "but, damn it all! don't you know."

And then Betty saw that the clergyman was Lomax, and held out her hand to him.

"So you've missed the train, too?" she smiled.

He shook hands with her, and she piloted him towards the slow one, that was starting in a minute or two from another platform, and they secured a carriage to themselves.

"If you don't mind traveling third," apologized Betty.

"Always do," said Lomax promptly. "Less cushion; but more courtesy."

They rattled out under the broad arch towards Shoreditch and Haggerston, and something in his face, as he glanced through the windows, set her smiling as she guessed his thoughts.

"You're not very fond of London?" she asked him.

"Not of this part of it, I'm afraid," he confessed.

She looked out across the roof-tops.

"Do you remember," she said, "how we used to talk about Hoxton? It's just over there, you know, in all that."

"Do you work there still?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "Why not?"

Looking into her face, he noticed no change of color or contour, only perhaps the slightest evidence of some added gravity. But next moment she was smiling again.

"And how's your friend Mr. Broggers?" she asked.

"And—and his pulse?"

Lomax leant back in his corner, and laughed.

"Fit as a two-year-old," he said. "Fit as a two-year-old."

"That's a horse, isn't it?" asked Betty. "And Robin?"

"Well, he's in England for a month or two just now. Otherwise he's still in Paris, you know, at Briand's studio."

"Briand's? Oh, I'm glad. He wasn't ever happy in the city, I think; not really happy. And I'm so fond of Briand's work."

"Do you know it, then?" asked Lomax. "I thought it was hardly appreciated yet on this side of the Channel, at least, not by—not by——"

"Outsiders?" smiled Betty. "But I love it in spite of that. That was one of the things that Robin taught me."

"To be fond of Briand?"

"To try and look for beauty."

Lomax glanced out of the window again.

"And do you find it?" he asked.

"Sometimes," she said; "but don't you think it's rather hard to find the beauty in one's own little corner—especially if one's known it so long, and never—never demanded any beauty from it before? Yet I believe it's there, even when I'm most—when I'm calling out loudest for a new horizon."

"That doesn't come?"

She shook her head.

"Ah, but it does," he assured her. "It's coming all the time. That's the blessedest thing about Youth, my dear. It's coming all the time; and sooner or later, something, almost any quaint sort of a thing, is bound to crop up just to show you how fast your promised land has been surrounding you—and what a surprise." He shook his head at her in a half-mock sorrow.

"Presently we get beyond surprises," he said.

Betty was silent.

"And Madame Dubroullé?" she asked slowly—"Judy—what's happened to her?"

"Well, now," said Lomax, "that is rather curious."

"Is she still on the stage?"

He shook his head.

"She left the stage just after—well, about three years ago. She had a contract in Paris, that she felt bound to fulfil, I think. And then she left."

He hesitated.

"Did you know that she had a husband?"

Betty nodded.

"Well, she's gone back to him. You would have said it was the unlikeliest thing possible. But he came to her in Paris. He had fallen on bad times. He wanted some money. And he was ill. So she went back to him."

He paused again.

"I don't think that's so *very* surprising, is it?" asked Betty at last.

Lomax looked at her thoughtfully.

"You would have done the same, perhaps?" he suggested.

The train was drawing up now at the Highbury platform, and Betty rose to leave the carriage. Lomax opened the door for her. He was going on to Camden Town. She gave him her hand, with half a smile.

"God hasn't let me," she said; and left Lomax puzzling over an age-old riddle.

And yet, oddly enough, it was upon this same evening that most of the other important secrets of the Universe unfolded themselves in the easiest way possible to two not very distant persons at identically the same moment, and in a silence that could be felt—that indeed was felt, only it was quite dark, so that nobody could see.

"Except that very small star, perhaps," whispered Margaret. "And I expect he thought it rather silly."

"Silly?" said Robin; "well, I don't know. It was the only thing possible, wasn't it?" He looked at her solemnly. "It was always you, you know. Only I never knew it. I suppose it was because you were sort of *there* all the time—so close—that I never knew how deep I was in love, in—in the real sort of love. And yet I always came to you, didn't I, about all the important things?"

Margaret was glad that it was dark.

"But I didn't mean all that exactly," she explained. "I meant the clumsy way we did it in the end, you know—just now."

Robin laughed.

"Oh, never mind that!" he said. They looked up together at the star. "I don't think he'll give us away—or, at any rate, not until it doesn't matter."

It was during the following summer, in the Octagon room at Burlington House, and at the twinkling (and successful) feet of Robin's Diana, that four persons confronted one another rather suddenly and shook hands with cordiality.

"I think she's lovely!" said Betty, and Jim, swarthy from a tropical voyage, nodded his head in emphasis.

"Yes, you're a lucky beggar, you know, to be able to do things like that," he said.

His tone seemed almost envious, and Robin was a little surprised.

"Oh, I don't know!" he said. "Would you like to have done it yourself?"

"Yes, I would," said Jim.

"But not—you'd rather convert your yellow people, wouldn't you?"

Jim was silent for a moment. Then he smiled.

"Yes," he said, "I love my yellow people, and I wouldn't leave them for anything—not even to make goddesses. But then it's my game, you know, as you used to say."

"And Peter?" asked Robin. "And your father? Are they here as well?"

There was a ghost of a twinkle in Jim's eye that presently found a comrade in Betty's. They shook their heads simultaneously.

"And Chris?" inquired Betty. "Where's Chris?"

"Up the Zambesi," said Robin, "with a hunting party."

"And he's been and bagged a lion," put in Margaret. Jim smiled again.

"Just to prove that you haven't a monopoly?" he asked, a little pointedly, and Margaret blushed.

"But how proud you must be of him," said Betty, when Robin wasn't listening.

It was a minute or two after this that Robin, catching sight of his better-half-to-be, beheld (or imagined) something queer about her eyes.

"Why, you're——"

"No, I'm not," she said, dabbing them. "Yes, I am, though. Let's go and have tea somewhere."

But even after tea her explanation of the phenomenon was a little vague.

"How ripping everybody is!" she said.

Robin stretched his legs and lit a cigarette.

"I suppose," he reflected wisely—"I suppose we're growing up."



WILLIAM DE MORGAN'S SOMEHOW GOOD

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